

## Pet Peeves of a Private Practitioner—Part I

It's January, and hard into the flu season. On those days when I'm in my role of doctor, I see a number of patients who present with fever, muscle aches, a slight headache and a dry cough, i.e., symptoms of "The Flu." Influenza, the more proper term, can be a bad illness. The exact virus strains are never the same from year to year, and while we have recurrent flu seasons that last generally from late fall through mid-winter, one never really knows how sick patients will be. Ideally, we'd all get our flu shots, but many don't. Oftentimes, early medical treatment for flu cases can lessen symptoms, shorten the duration of illness, and in some cases save lives. On the other hand, delay in treatment for a bad case of influenza can be dangerous, even fatal at times.

Almost everyone who presents to the office with flu symptoms has tried over-the-counter (OTC) medicines, usually with little or no response. These days, I'd venture that more than half have tried Mucinex<sup>®</sup>, the brand name of a series of cold and flu meds that all contain



guaifenesin. They are heavily promoted on TV, with cute commercials that feature a cartoon character dubbed "Mr. Mucus" (according to the company's website). He, and similar associates, look like mobile versions of Jabba the Hut and speak with what appears to be a Brooklyn accent. Not nice folk.

If you ask patients why they chose Mucinex<sup>®</sup>, they'll almost uniformly respond that they'd seen it on TV, and it seemed like it would be a good medicine for their symptoms. Generally, Mucinex<sup>®</sup> is perceived as a "new" and "effective" drug, based solely on what might be best described as "new" and "effective" advertising. It's expensive; at my local Wal-Mart it's about \$7.84 before tax for twelve doses (about 65¢ to 70¢ a dose), well in excess of many

generic antibiotics. And from my perspective as a physician, it's probably does nothing more than delay proper treatment.

Let me say at this point that I'm all for patients treating themselves if they know what they're doing. I'm like everyone else; I hate going to the doctor if I can avoid it. But what I do resent is patients spending money on things that are at best ineffective and/or innocuous, and at worst allow them to become sicker while mistakenly thinking they're fighting the illness that has befallen them.

So, a little education seems appropriate. Mucinex<sup>®</sup> is simply a very, very old drug that has been reintroduced under a new name, promoted by a multimillion dollar ad campaign, and is of very uncertain effectiveness for what it's promoted to treat. The basic ingredient is

guaifenesin, a drug who use in folk medicine dates back centuries. In its pure form, it was approved for use by the FDA in 1952, more than sixty years ago, and has been on the market ever since. Prior to its



current rebranding campaign, the best known over-the-counter version was plain Robitussin. In generic form, it's dirt cheap, with most of the cost of the product being spent on packaging. The one dubious advantage of the Mucinex<sup>®</sup> brand it that it has time-released versions, but without clear evidence they are more effective than the standard types.

Guaifenesin is most commonly used as an expectorant, that is, a substance that make the body produce more, but thinner mucus, thus "clearing" the respiratory tract. It also has been tried for multiple other conditions ranging from a compound to facilitate conception to an adjunct in veterinary anesthesia for horses. It's often found in combination with other drugs,

e.g., cough suppressants, decongestants, and the like. In fact, a National Institutes of Health website lists something like 227 OTC medicines that contain guaifenesin.

Most importantly, there's very little evidence that it does much good for anything. Wikipedia, for example, notes that "objective" evidence for its effectiveness is "limited and conflicting." One of the most common combinations is with dextromethorphan, a cough *suppressant*. Seems a bit strange to combine a drug that allegedly increases mucus, then suppresses the cough you need to bring it up. But Mucinex-DM<sup>®</sup> does just this. The website explains it all by alleging it "Fights Congestion," provides "Serious Sinus Support," and "Tame[s] Your Cough." Can anyone tell me what those phrases mean?

So, what happens is this: A poor patient, sick with the flu or some other respiratory condition, shows up at my office a week or so after he should have with the complaint, "I've been sick for a week, but I've been treating myself at home with Mucinex<sup>®</sup>. I'm not sure it's working." No joke! One can only hope that in his well-intended trial of self-treatment, he hasn't managed to make himself worse.