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## **Doctoring the News** **CNN's Sanjay Gupta, Laura Bush and the Marketing of Merck's Gardasil**

By Pam Martens

**C**NN's Chief Medical Correspondent, Dr. Sanjay Gupta, was raising eyebrows five months before he bungled his fact-checking segment on Michael Moore's health care documentary, "Sicko," leaving Moore and many of CNN's viewers questioning Gupta's journalistic integrity. Writing on his CNN blog on February 28, 2007, Dr. Gupta endorsed Merck's controversial and scientifically challenged vaccine for girls and young women, Gardasil, without shedding any light on the incestuous relationship he has with Merck.

"As a doctor, and parent, I would recommend the vaccine for my daughters. I feel the ability to protect them in any way, including from cancer, is my primary obligation." (1)

The vaccine is being touted by Dr. Gupta, First Lady Laura Bush, and nonprofit groups funded by Merck as a means of preventing cervical cancer. In fact, however, its clinical trials never tested for preventing cervical cancer. The vaccine was tested for preventing pre cancerous lesions associated with two strains of Human Papillomavirus (HPV), a sexually transmitted disease. Since these lesions can take 12 to 20 years to develop into cervical cancer and the clinical trials lasted less than five years, medical experts warn that the jury is still out on what impact this vaccine might have on cervical cancer rates.

The results of Merck's clinical trials showed the efficacy of the vaccine was "modest," even for preventing pre cancerous lesions, among a general population of young women, according to the New England Journal of Medicine. (2)

This might have been enough to kill the idea of mass inoculations

with the vaccine had Merck released its final clinical trial data to peer reviewed journals in a timely fashion. Instead, it launched three ad and marketing campaigns that fostered the false impression that this vaccine had been proven to prevent cervical cancer along with a public relations blitz that stretched from California to Paris and involved payments to journalists. Only then, after the Food and Drug Administration had approved the drug, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had recommended it for broad use, and questions grew in the press as to why this "miracle breakthrough" had not been peer reviewed, did Merck finally release its late phase trial data.

Eleven and twelve year old girls, the very target of proposed mandatory vaccination by Merck, were never tested at all for efficacy in pre-licensing clinical trials. Merck simply decided that the bodies of prepubescent girls would react the same as mature women to the vaccine. The FDA was fully aware of this when they licensed the vaccine for potentially millions of prepubescent girls, requiring only that post licensing studies be done for efficacy and safety on these children *after* they were injected with the drug. (3)

Dr. Gupta began his on-air promotions for Gardasil eight months before the vaccine was vetted and approved by the FDA. Here's a segment from a "CNN Live Today" broadcast of October 6, 2005:

"GUPTA: The vaccine is called Gardasil, and Merck and Company Inc., the manufacturer, says it plans to apply for a license before the end of the year. Now, if approved, this vaccine may become extremely common, recommended to all women in their teenage years before they become sexually active. Rose Dennis had no such option. She had to endure a hysterectomy, chemotherapy and radiation to become cancer free. For her, and possibly thousands of others, a vaccine would make all the difference."  
(4)

Dr. Gupta continued over the ensuing months to promote Gardasil. Here's an excerpt from the "Anderson Cooper 360 Degrees" broadcast on June 29, 2006:

"GUPTA: Now there is a way to prevent the virus from ever

taking hold in the first place. It's a vaccine. Typically, you think of vaccines for the measles or chicken pox. But Gardasil protects you against cancer. Trials showed the vaccine could lower cervical cancer rates by 70 percent." (5)

The clinical trials for Gardasil showed no such thing. (6) Even Merck is not making this wild and unsupported claim.

On May 17, 2007, CNN aired an interview between Dr. Gupta and First Lady Laura Bush. (7) Video Clip. The First Lady endorses mass inoculations of children with Gardasil on the basis that it will protect them later in life against cervical cancer. Gupta does not challenge her on the fact that there is zero evidence that the vaccine provides such long-term protection. The vaccine's own researcher acknowledges this. (8)

Would any of the following information have been relevant for Dr. Gupta or the First Lady to share with CNN viewers in discussing a vaccine planned for mass inoculations of children: according to Merck's SEC filing 11 days prior to this broadcast, the company is facing a criminal investigation by the Bush administration's U.S. Department of Justice over Vioxx marketing; a scheme that concealed tens of thousands of heart attacks and strokes caused by its last blockbuster drug, Vioxx. Additionally, the company reported it "has also been named as a defendant in separate lawsuits brought by the Attorneys General of Alaska, Louisiana, Mississippi, Montana, Texas and Utah. These actions allege that the Company misrepresented the safety of Vioxx." (9)

Perhaps Dr. Gupta was reluctant to bring up the subject of Vioxx, given his early dismissal of the dangers. Here's how he responded to Miles O'Brien on CNN's "American Morning" on October 30, 2003:

"Miles O'Brien: Let's talk about Vioxx. Some indication it might increase the risk of heart attack?

"Gupta: This stat has been around since August of 2001. They talked about the increase of heart attack with Vioxx. The numbers are very small. Perhaps a small percentage increase in the overall risk of heart attacks with Vioxx. They say 37 percent

to 39 percent but that's of a very small number. After 90 days, no increased risk." (10 )

It's difficult to imagine a statement more riddled with factual inaccuracies. And where did Dr. Gupta get his information? He tells us in the interview: "We've talked to the makers of Vioxx, the Merck company."

The overarching issue in all of this is the dangerous and growing tentacles of a corporate agenda that seeks to control every message pertaining to its corporate brands in every venue visited or medium viewed by a consumer. That includes TV and cable news. Increasingly, corporations demand "integration" for their advertising dollars.

Dr. Gupta is part of this new wave of "integration" as co-host of a program called AccentHealth. Here's how the AccentHealth website explains itself: (11)

"AccentHealth is America's #1 integrated health media company offering advertisers multiple consumer touch points in the place where health matters most the doctors office. AccentHealth's waiting room TV network produced by CNN and hosted by CNN's Dr. Sanjay Gupta and Robin Meade, reaches 132 million viewers annually in 185 Nielsen Markets...To complement your broadcast message, and the consumer focused product information you can provide in our 10,800 offices, AccentHealth offers another channel into the physician's office -- a unique fax program that can help you strengthen your physician relationships...Reinforce product credibility through the "Halo Effect..." How would you like to see your product on our show? AccentHealth runs frequent on-air promotions to engage viewers and ensure more focused viewing...Our healthy mascot "Abby Apple" has been reminding our viewers to lead a healthy lifestyle for 4 years! Abby can appear on-air using your product... AccentHealth is committed to meeting your campaign expectations. With an audience of receptive, health conscious consumers and a direct line into the physician's office we will customize your AccentHealth initiative to meet your specific brand goals...Use our production facilities to create a custom message for our unique environment...Let us organize a consumer event to coincide with your AccentHealth

on-air campaign...."

In a January 17, 2007 interview with *TV Week*, Greg D'Alba, Chief Operating Officer of CNN ad sales and marketing, explained what's driving "integration." "What's interesting is it's not about what's new anymore, but what's becoming the norm...For every fully integrated package that we present there is an advertiser. We're batting 1,000 percent on that. And it's not because we're developing it and throwing it out there and we're finding sponsors, it's because our advertisers and our partners are requesting it, they're demanding it." (12)

Given the incestuous nature of "integration," should Dr. Sanjay Gupta have revealed to his CNN viewers during his extolling of the virtues of Gardasil that its manufacturer, Merck, was a financial sponsor of this integrated marketing scheme he co-hosts at AccentHealth? And exactly who prepared and vetted the First Lady's whopper on Gardasil? Should the First Lady have been commenting at all on a product from a company under criminal investigation by the U.S. Department of Justice? Inquiring minds not yet "integrated" want to know.

**Pam Martens** previously worked on Wall Street for 21 years. (She has no stock position, long or short, in Merck or any pharmaceutical company.) She resides in New Hampshire and writes on topics that impact the public interest. Ms. Martens can be reached at [pamk741@aol.com](mailto:pamk741@aol.com)

## Notes

- (1) [Gupta Blog](#) of February 28, 2007:
- (2) [New England Journal of Medicine Editorial](#):
- (3) [FDA Approval Letter](#); see numbered paragraph 1.
- (4) CNN Transcript; [Gupta on Gardasil](#): October 6, 2005
- (5) CNN Transcript; [Gupta on Gardasil](#): June 29, 2006
- (6) [New England Journal of Medicine Editorial on Gardasil](#):

- (7) Gupta interviews [Laura Bush on Gardasil](#):
- (8) HPV researcher corrects [Gardasil myths](#):
- (9) Merck's [10Q SEC Filing](#):
- (10) CNN Transcript: [Gupta on Vioxx](#); October 30, 2003
- (11) AccentHealth [Web Site](#):
- (12) TV Week interview with [Greg D'Alba](#):