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VIOXX LEGAL ACTION PROGRESSES

An Australian law firm investigating possible legal action on behalf of hundreds of Australians affected by the arthritis drug Vioxx says expert advice expected shortly will determine the future of any legal case.

Slater & Gordon has been approached by more than 300 former Vioxx users of whom nearly 100 suffered heart attacks. Most of the others suffered strokes.

Slater & Gordon special counsel Richard Meeran says the law firm has been conducting extensive investigations into the case, in collaboration with UK lawyers.

"The conclusions of a team of eminent experts who are evaluating the various studies on Vioxx patients are expected shortly," Mr Meeran said.

"Their advice will be critical to the decision whether or not to proceed with the case."

Mr Meeran says it is highly regrettable that, despite clear warning signals in March 2000 that taking Vioxx significantly increased the risk of cardiovascular disease, the manufacturer Merck & Co failed to warn doctors or patients until April 2002.

"The Australian Therapeutic Goods Administration, whose key function is to protect the public from defective drugs, must also share some of the responsibility for allowing this state of affairs to continue, and for not taking steps itself to issue warnings," Mr Meeran said.

"Doctors and their patients were denied the right to consider whether or not Vioxx should be taken in view of the cardiovascular risks.

"In the process, many lives must have been lost."

In Australia 250,000-300,000 people were taking Vioxx. It is possible that thousands have suffered adverse effects from the drug.

In the United States 20 million people have been prescribed the drug with estimates that Merck could face a damages bill of up to \$US18 billion.

Vioxx is a COX-2 inhibitor, a class of drugs that reduce pain and inflammation without causing the stomach upset and ulcers which are side effects of some other painkillers. Other arthritis treatments are not under question.

- Slater & Gordon previously represented thousands of Australian women who were the first in the world to receive compensation from US breast implant manufacturers including Dow Corning.

For more information:

Richard Meeran, Special Counsel, Slater & Gordon (03) 9602 6888

Andrew Taylor 0411 156 797