

Contact: Julie Totten, President and Founder
Families for Depression Awareness, www.familyaware.org
(617) 924-9383

Family Caregivers Should Actively Monitor Depression Treatment

Watertown, Mass., March 30, 2004 — Families for Depression Awareness, a national nonprofit organization that focuses on importance of family caregivers in recognizing and treating depressive disorders, supports the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) recent health advisory that urges families to actively monitor antidepressant treatment. Families for Depression Awareness has always emphasized the importance of family caregivers, and now the FDA recommends this level of family involvement as a critical element of effective antidepressant treatment.

"Close treatment monitoring should be the norm, but it's not," said Julie Totten, president and founder of Families for Depression Awareness. "We embrace the FDA's advice that family caregivers should be actively involved in observing and discussing symptom changes in patients. This inclusive family approach to treatment is essential and should replace the notion that the management of depression treatment only exists between patients and their clinicians."

Family caregivers provide invaluable additional insight into changes in patient's symptoms. Thus, they play a critical role in watching for signs of mania in patients, one of the FDA's concerns. If mania is observed, clinicians can then correctly diagnose patients with bipolar disorder and prescribe the appropriate medication.

The goal of Families for Depression Awareness is to give families the knowledge and support they need to help their loved ones in their struggle with depression. "Members of our organization have lost a family member to suicide because of untreated depression, others because treatment didn't work or because patients stopped treatment," said Totten. "In commenting on the FDA's advisory, we are trying to prevent more suicides from happening. The message needs to be crystal clear: People must actively seek medical treatment for their depression and discuss, follow and monitor their treatment with their families and clinicians."

Families for Depression Awareness seeks to clarify that by issuing this caution on antidepressants, the FDA does not intend for people to stop treatment or do without treatment because they fear that antidepressants will be harmful. The FDA has not warned against the *use* of antidepressants, the organization stresses, only the inadequate *monitoring* of their use. Depression is a real medical condition that requires treatment, whether that is medication, psychotherapy or other appropriate therapies. Medication is a lifesaver for many and often prevents suicides. Medication should be prescribed and monitored on a case-by-case basis, depending on the individual's symptoms, needs and family history.

"More studies need to be completed on the safety of medication in children and teenagers," Totten said. "In the meantime, suicide, primarily among those who are *untreated*, is the third leading cause of death among 15 to 24 year olds. Nearly 15 percent of high school students have made a suicide plan. Clinicians, in trying to prevent these suicides, must examine each child and teen individually and make a judgment call as to when to prescribe medication."

Families for Depression Awareness, www.familyaware.org, is a national nonprofit organization helping families recognize and cope with depressive disorders. The organization provides education, outreach, and advocacy to support families. Families for Depression Awareness is made up of families who have lost a family member to suicide or have watched a loved one suffer with depression, with little knowledge about how to help.

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