

medical examiner
Strange Medicine

Why are the new **cancer drugs so expensive?**

By Robert Bazell

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At the recent annual gathering of the American Society of Clinical Oncology, which 27,000 cancer specialists attended, much of the news coverage focused on the new "targeted therapies" and much of the talk in the hallways on the astonishing prices drug companies are charging for them. For years, we've been hearing about the "magic bullet" drugs that will expand cancer treatment beyond the long-standing triad of surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy (often derisively called slash, burn, and poison). A few of these new drugs have won FDA approval and come to market, but the prices are so high that many patients who might benefit will not get them.

Eribitux, a targeted therapy for colon cancer, might be forever known as the drug that led to Martha Stewart's downfall. (ImClone, the biotechnology company founded by her friend Sam Waksal, made the drug.) But recently Eribitux has acquired a new, and perhaps more ominous, distinction. At **\$17,000 a month**, Eribitux is one of the most expensive cancer drugs ever made. For the record, it is not the most expensive. That distinction is currently held by Zevalin, a **\$24,000-a-month** treatment for a relatively rare type of lymphoma. But the prevalence of colon cancer—the disease strikes 106,000 Americans a year—makes the price of Eribitux especially troubling. Avastin, a second targeted therapy for colon cancer approved by the FDA in February, costs **\$4,400 a month** - still an enormous amount for a drug. A recent editorial in the *New England Journal of Medicine* calculated that adding Avastin alone to the regimen for treating advanced colon cancer would add \$1.5 billion a year in new national health costs. Eribitux, obviously, could increase national health costs by many times that figure.

- **Please, DO NOT accept an insurance plan with no or a limited drug benefit.**
- **There is no adding medical or drug coverage once the medical bills start coming in.**
- **After the deductible / coinsurance are satisfied, make sure those drugs are paid for.**

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