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## The Way We Love Now

By Abraham Verghese

Ever since its launch in 1998, Viagra has been a dream drug for Pfizer. In just the last year the company saw \$1.7 billion in sales. But Pfizer will soon have competition from two new drugs, Levitra and Cialis, in a market it once had all to itself. Levitra is supposed to have a quicker onset of action and works whether your stomach is empty or not. Cialis's merit is that it lasts for 36 hours (which fact a woman friend pointed out should allow about 35.5 hours of foreplay). Touted as more "natural," in that one can ingest the pill Friday night and theoretically be armed for action till the wee hours of Sunday, Cialis is dubbed "le weekender" in Europe.

Consider how we arrived in these priapic times and pity the men of bygone eras who ingested the genitals of goats, chewed tiger parts, and paid fortunes for rhino horn almost driving that species to extinction. Indeed, for the last 5,000 years the treatment of erectile dysfunction (the term *du jour* for this ancient problem) was exactly where the penile size-enhancement business is today: an abundance of snake-oil salesmen but no inches gained. The watershed moment occurred at a urology conference in Las Vegas in 1983 when a scientist who'd injected a drug into the base of his penis before speaking, dropped his pants at the podium, walked through the aisles and allowed fellow urologists to marvel at his breakthrough.

As a demonstration of matter over mind it was potent -- but understandably not for everyone. So when scientists discovered that a drug called sildenafil citrate could boost the chemical messengers that cause an erection after arousal, we had at last arrived at a solution for Everyman. Pfizer

named its golden goose Viagra and packaged it in a rhomboid, sky-blue pill that became as iconic as the twin arches of a certain burger franchise. Since its launch, 500 million pills have been sold at rhino-horn prices. Pfizer had three million users in the U.S. but that is a fraction of the 30 million men in America who experience erectile dysfunction. Pfizer's ads are aimed at bringing this reluctant group in to see the doctor. As baby boomers age, erectile dysfunction will become more common. The market will swell but Viagra will not be the sole player.

What does expanding usage of these drugs mean to society and what new myths will Viagra and its clones create? Will women view the pills as a blessing or will they wonder, to paraphrase Mae West, "Is that a pill in your gullet or are you just happy to see me?" Women will have to contend with men who in theory can be potent till their last breath. Indeed the last breath may come at an inopportune moment if the heart, unlike that other organ, is not up to the task. When Viagra first came out there were tabloid tales of retired, happily married men who abandoned wives to forage in more youthful pastures. There were of course many more who found renewed satisfaction in existing relationships, but that story rarely makes the tabloids.

A behaviorist might argue that if we create the physical capability, we are also creating the desire and thus fundamentally changing the organism. Peter Kramer, in "Listening to Prozac," wrote about the possibility of Prozac creating a self that was in some cases "better" than the original self. Will Viagra and Levitra (just listen to the metaphorical implications of these names)

elevate us to a being more interesting than our original? Indeed Viagra TV ads imply just this with "Joe" walking into the office and his coworkers trying to guess what's different about him: A new haircut? Is he working out? A vacation? Joe never lets on to the secret that only he, his doctor and a few million viewers are privy to: He owes his new improved self to Viagra.

Aging boomers who have readily embraced prosthetic joints, tummy tucks, laser peels and anything that enables a youthful lifestyle or at least the appearance of one will be major consumers of these pills. Like aesthetic plastic surgery, Viagra and its peers are, for many, "enhancement" medicine: they're not treating a disease but trying to make "ideal" a flagging physiological system. Indeed, Viagra is finding much use in young sexually active men, perhaps as insurance against a flop when the show begins. Much like growth hormones for short kids, the question is when is a good thing unnecessary, when is it enough, and when is it too much?

It is sobering to stack the millions that will be spent in drug development and marketing, and the billions consumers and insurers will pay for these new drugs, against the global health picture. Mathematical models predict

100 million HIV infections in the world by 2010. Indeed, considered together, the combination of drug resistant TB, AIDS, famine and malaria raise the possibility of public health catastrophes in the near future not seen since the great plagues of Europe. In such times Viagra and its clones strike an odd note. They seem to hold a mirror up to us and we may not like what we see.

Ultimately, technology, even medical technology, is not value-neutral even though we tend to see it that way. But the technology here is outwardly so simple, so marvelous, that it is tough to imagine shortcomings: swallow little pill, rise to the occasion, attain tantric nirvana, descend to baseline -- but what is the baseline and has it been altered? The widespread use of drugs like Viagra will change relationships, and will alter the nature of growing old. We hope it will be for the better though we cannot assume that. On the eve of the coming advertising blitz for Levitra (with spots running during NFL games and with Mike Ditka as spokesman) and with Viagra linking its name to Nascar and pro-baseball, I feel the urge to take a walk, to look around, to savor this moment. We may one day marvel at the poignancy and purity of intimacy -- before the hype of these pills made it into a jingle.

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