Hydrochlorothiazide and skin cancer: a debatable warning?

Sanne van der Heijden

Dutch care providers and patients were confronted in October 2018 by a nationwide warning about a “slightly increased” risk of squamous cell carcinoma (SCC) and basal cell carcinoma (BCC) when using hydrochlorothiazide. Although there was no need to actively invite regular users of the drug for consultation, it was recommended to inform them about this association at regular follow-up appointments. If patients had SCC or BCC or were at increased risk thereof, their use of hydrochlorothiazide would need to be reviewed. This rather vague advice was based on two Danish case-control studies which found positive associations between hydrochlorothiazide and SCC (after >5.5 years of 12.5 mg daily) or BCC (after >11 years of 12.5 mg daily). The effects found are, however, too small to warrant immediate discontinuation of hydrochlorothiazide, especially for patients using sufficient protection against sunlight. These findings are of little or no consequence for the balance between the safety and effectiveness of hydrochlorothiazide in the treatment of hypertension.