

NEWS IN BRIEF



HORMONE THERAPY REDEEMED

In 2002, a large government study published alarming results which found that hormone replacement therapy (HRT) significantly increased the risk of heart disease, breast cancer and stroke.

Now, a new analysis of that same data shows that HRT is safe for women in their 50s who use it only to treat menopausal symptoms. Researchers note that if women start hormone therapy within the first 10 years after the onset of menopause to treat hot flashes and night sweats, and remain on it for no more than four to five years, the risk of heart disease is minimal. Unfortunately, the same does not hold true for older women. Intense menopausal symptoms may also be associated with increased risk factors for heart disease, prompting advice to those who suffer the most discomfort to screen for possible underlying hypertension, hypercholesterolemia, diabetes and obesity.

Reassuring as these findings are, HRT is still a gamble. Even in women taking the treatment who were less than 10 years from the onset of menopause, there was a 77% higher risk of stroke and a 19% higher risk of breast cancer. Doctors urge those who take hormones to have regular mammograms and blood pressure monitoring.

(Source: *Time Magazine*)

THE DISEASE IS THE REMEDY

Dr Maurizio Bendandi and his team at Spain's Centre for Applied Medical Research and the University of Navarre Hospital recently published results from a 5-year-long study on customised cancer vaccines – results which have been described as “remarkable” by the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*.

Using a patient's own tumour cells to provoke an immunological response, vaccines are one of the most promising developments in the fight against cancer, and a goal hotly pursued by researchers around the world. The Pamplona-based group demonstrated that a customised vaccine could extend, perhaps indefinitely, the cancer-free period for patients with follicular lymphoma.

Targeting an idotype – the unique protein carried by lymphoma cells which distinguishes them from their healthy counterparts – the vaccine presents a tumour protein to the patients in such a way that their immune systems recognise it and destroy any cells bearing that protein.

Although a vaccine for follicular lymphoma was first pioneered by Stanford University's Ron Levy more than 25 years ago, the method was modified in 1999 by Larry Kwak, eliminating residual disease in 15 out of 20 post-chemotherapy study patients. Now Bendandi has erected what he calls “the third pillar” of customised therapy by demonstrating that the vaccine produces not just molecular benefits, but clinical ones as well. In other words, the patients in his study remained in remission for longer than expected.

However, his study design is being questioned, since Bendandi has opted for patients to act as their own controls, instead of comparing them with a separate placebo group. The treatment cost is substantial (an estimated \$34,000 per patient), the vaccine is difficult to manufacture, and not all pharmaceutical companies (which profit by mass-producing drugs) are able – or willing – to take on the work of producing a different vaccine for every patient.

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Still, Bendandi remains undeterred, and is now working on a new study which tests the vaccine's effectiveness in follicular lymphoma patients with an especially poor prognosis. "This time," he says, "I'm going after a cure."

(Source: *Time Magazine*)

CHANNELLING TIMOTHY LEARY

A quiet psychedelic renaissance is beginning at the highest levels of American science, including the National Institute of Mental Health and Harvard, which is conducting what is thought to be its first research into the therapeutic uses of psychedelics since the university fired Timothy Leary in 1963.

Last year, two top journals published papers showing clear benefits from the use of psychedelics to treat mental illness. "Robust and rapid anti-depressant effects" were observed in depressed subjects who were given ketamine, while another study noted "acute reductions in core obsessive-compulsive symptoms" in

OCD patients taking psilocybin (the chemical in psychedelic mushrooms). Now researchers at Harvard are studying how ecstasy might help alleviate anxiety disorders, while the Beckley Foundation (a British trust) has received approval to begin what will be the first human studies with LSD since the 1970s.

Psychedelics chemically alter the way your brain takes in information and may cause you to lose control of typical thought patterns. The theory motivating the recent research is that if your thoughts are depressed or obsessive, the drugs may reveal a path through them.

But even as the *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* paper trumpets psilocybin's potential for "powerful insights", it also urges caution. Researchers suggest psilocybin only for severe OCD patients who have failed standard therapies and, as a last resort, may face brain surgery. Similarly, subjects cannot take part in the ecstasy trials unless their illness has failed conventional treatment. ■

(Source: *Time Magazine*)