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Experimental drug slows advance of multiple sclerosis

Associated Press

NEW YORK – Researchers using an experimental drug have succeeded for the first time in slowing the progression of a type of multiple sclerosis in which the unpredictable atttacks leave victims increasingly disabled.

The medication, discussed yesterday at the annual meeting of the Americam Neurological Association in San Francisco, also reduces the number of MS attacks

The drugs are aimed at a relapsing kind of MS affecting 75,000 to 140,000 Americans. In all, about 250,000 to 350,000 Americans have MS.

People with relapsing MS suffer bouts of symptoms, including fatigue, impaired vision, loss of balance and co-ordination, slurred speech, tremors and partial or complete paralysis. Patients recover at least partially during the weeks or months after each episode but become progressively disabled.

Doctors now treat many people with relapsing MS with a drug called interferon beta 1B, or Betaseron. The drug, approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration just last yesar, reduces the frequency and severity of attacks.

The new results are welcome because the experimental drugs may provide options, said Stephen Reingold, vice-president for research and medical programs at the national Multiple Sclerosis Society.

"From our prespective, this is terrific", he said, adding that the new results must be analyzed completely, published for scrutiny by experts and submitted to the FDA for evaluation as soon as possible.

One study found that a drug called copolymer I reduced the number of MS attacks. Researchers had 125 patients inject themselves daily with the drug, and 126 inject themselves with a placebo. Over two years, patients using the drug had a total of 160 MS attacks, compared with 210 in the pkacebo group.

The other study found that a substance called interferon beta-1A can prevent or delay increases in long-term symptoms as well as reduce the number of attacks, said principal investigator Dr. Lawrence Jacobs.

The study was done with 301 patients who had zero to moderate symptoms between attacks. They received weekly injections of either the beta interferon – which is different from Betaseron – or a placebo.

Researchers measured the progression of the disability with a 10-step scale that looked at weakness or spasticity in the limbs, double vision, slurred speech and lack of co-ordination. They followed patients over two years to see how many avoided getting worse by a full step on the scale.

At the end of two years, 80 per cent of patients taking interferon had avoided this progression, versus 65 per cent of patients taking the placebo, Dr. Jacobs said.

The article EM9417 reprinted above is used in Chapter 10 of the STAT 231 Course Materials.

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