

NEWS BITES

INTERNATIONAL

Stimulating depressives

For chronically depressed adults who find no relief with drugs or psychotherapy, an implanted pacemaker-like device that sends electrical pulses to the brain – so-called vagus nerve stimulation – may provide long-term benefits. This according to two reports last month at the American Psychiatric Association annual meeting in Toronto.

‘With other treatment methods, if you get a response among treatment-resistant depression patients, it is rare that they are able to hold on to that response,’ presenter Dr Stephen Brannan said. Even with shock therapy, within 6 months, the majority of patients have relapsed, he said. ‘What is really interesting in our study was that the onset of effect was slow, but once they get it, the benefit seems to last a long time,’ the researcher continued. ‘This is hugely different from anything I’ve seen in this field before, because these patients usually have the illness for the rest of their lives.’

It is estimated that 10 - 20% of patients with major depression have treatment-resistant depression. According to the FDA, only patients who have failed 4 other types of treatment can be considered candidates for vagus nerve stimulation.

Brannan at Cyberonics Inc. in Houston, Texas, and colleagues found that 72% of treatment-resistant depressed patients who responded early (within the first 3 months) maintained their response at 12 months and 61% at 24 months. Among late responders, defined as response by 12 months, 79% remained stable at 24 months.

Doctors perform breakthrough heart surgery

Heart specialist Sir Magdi Yacoub has spoken out about how he helped remove a 12-year-old girl’s donor heart, which she had started to reject, and restart her own, dormant heart in a pioneering operation in London. He advised the surgeons who carried out the procedure on Hannah Clark – understood to be a medical first in Britain – in February after he came out of retirement at the request of the girl’s parents.

Yacoub explained that a transplant patient’s original heart was not normally left inside the body, but doctors had thought ahead in Clark’s case. ‘At the time we had the idea that she had this very severe muscle disease and there was the outside possibility that her heart would recover,’ he said. ‘Her own heart has recovered. It really is absolutely wonderful news,’ Yacoub told BBC News.

The girl had enjoyed good health with the donor heart until November when a cardiologist found that her body was rejecting the organ, which Yacoub had transplanted 10 years ago in a life-saving operation. The donor heart enabled the patient’s own organ to take a rest.

Clark had been suffering from cardiomyopathy, which made her heart double in size and threaten to fail within a year. Surgeons at Great Ormond Street Hospital in London were initially reluctant to remove the donor heart and reconnect the dormant one because they said it had never been done before.

Professor Peter Weissberg, medical director of the British Heart Foundation (BHF), hailed the outcome as an ‘exciting and important event’. The procedure went so well that the girl was able to return home within 5 days instead of being in intensive care for months as feared, he said. Another benefit of the operation is that she will not longer have to take the strong anti-rejection drugs necessary while she had the donor heart.

Hannah Clark has also battled lymph cancer for the past few years but is currently in remission after a successful course of chemotherapy in January of this year.

Baby survives six-organ transplant

Spanish doctors in La Paz Hospital, Madrid, have carried out a six-organ transplant on an 18-month-old girl who was born with cancer. The baby, named Cristina, was the fourth to undergo a multi-organ transplant at the hospital, but the first to recover enough to go home. The hospital said the other 3 patients had survived the surgery but had ultimately developed infections that killed them.

In the 11-hour operation on Cristina, doctors replaced her liver, pancreas, small intestine, large intestine, stomach and spleen. All of the organs came from the same donor.

‘It is a transplant of maximum complexity from every point of view,’ said Manuel Lopez Santamaria, the doctor who coordinated the surgical team.

Cristina was born with abdominal cancer and suffered multiple organ problems after a key artery was damaged in surgery aimed at removing the tumour. At the age of 15 months, she weighed just 6.5 kg and was fed intravenously.

AFRICA

Zim running out of AIDS drugs

Cash-strapped Zimbabwe is running out of AIDS drugs, with less than a month's supply of the ARVs left for 20 000 patients on a government treatment programme. 'We understand that drugs are competing with other items, like fuel, for foreign currency, but the picture is not encouraging,' said National Pharmaceutical Company boss Charles Mwaramba. 'We have been trying to contact the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe for decent amounts of foreign currency, but that has not been successful,' he added. The central bank gave the company US\$106 000 to import drugs from January to March this year, but the company required US\$7.4 million, said Mwaramba. Last year, the Health Ministry announced plans to provide free ARVs to 100 000 Zimbabweans by year end, but the government later acknowledged that it would not meet its target because of foreign currency shortages.

Pfizer 'violated law' by testing drug on children

A panel of Nigerian medical experts has concluded that Pfizer Inc violated international law during a 1996 epidemic by testing an unapproved drug on children with brain infections at a field hospital. That finding is detailed in a lengthy Nigerian government report that has remained unreleased for 5 years, despite inquiries from the children's attorneys and from the media. The *Washington Post* recently obtained a copy of the report, which is attracting congressional interest. The report concludes that Pfizer never obtained authorisation from the Nigerian government to give the unproven drug to nearly 100 children and infants. Pfizer selected the patients at a field hospital in the city of Kano, where the children had been taken to be treated for a deadly strain of meningitis. The report called the trial 'a clear case of exploitation of the ignorant'. Pfizer contended that its researchers travelled to Kano with a purely philanthropic motive, to help fight the epidemic, which ultimately killed more than 15 000 Africans.

SOUTH AFRICA

Raped child 'untreated for hours'

Bleeding profusely after being torn open during a rape, a 4-year-old girl was allegedly left untreated for several hours at the notorious Far East Rand Hospital. At 1pm on a Tuesday the child was brought to the hospital by ambulance. When the investigating officer arrived at 3.30pm that day, the child had still not been seen by the doctor on duty. He allegedly took a quick look at the child, but refused to start treatment, apparently claiming the next doctor on call had more experience in rape cases. The next morning, the officer found that the girl was still not treated. Hospital staff now not only face an internal investigation, but the very real

threat of possible criminal charges and civil claims. Support for the child and her family also came from various rape crisis organisations, all outraged that the child rape victim had not received immediate and proper medical care.

Patients can breathe again with new cancer treatment

A new treatment for asbestos-related lung cancer seems set to offer new hope in addressing the disease which has killed 2 700 South Africans. Early in May, pharmaceutical manufacturer Eli Lilly announced that a newly approved anti-cancer agent had been approved and was now available to South Africans. It is the first and only chemotherapy drugs approved to treat patients with mesothelioma, a cancer on the rise in this country. Not only has the treatment been proven to extend survival in patients, but it also boasts fewer life-threatening chemotherapy side-effects, the manufacturers say.

'Yes men' undermine SA medical institutions

The independence of some of the country's key medical institutions is being compromised by changes to the law and the appointment of 'yes men' to top posts.

Academics, doctors and activists have sounded the alarm at how the Health Department is gaining sway over the Medical Research Council (MRC), Medicines Control Council (MCC) and the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA).

The government's behind-the-scenes backing of Professor Anthony Mbewu, President of MRC, and Professor Nicky Padayachee, President of the HPCSA, are seen as moves to position allies in the posts. The appointment of officials who are unlikely to challenge the government is seen as undermining these bodies – and allowing the state to push its agenda, it has been claimed.

Amendments to the Medicines Act gave Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang greater control over the MCC Board. Tshabalala-Msimang also has powerful representation on the MRC Board via two senior government officials.

Collectively, the changes are of concern according to AIDS Law Project attorney, Jonathan Berger. In their dealings with Dr Matthias Rath, both institutions have demonstrated their willingness to entertain Tshabalala-Msimang's support for alternative AIDS therapies.

Health Ministry spokesperson Sibani Mngadi dismissed the allegations as unsubstantiated saying, 'The relationship between the minister and both the MRC and MCC is governed by the relevant legislation. Describing Professors Mbewu and Padayachee as "yes men" is undermining their integrity.'

Chris Bateman