

# MENOPAUSE



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*Claire Jamieson graduated from the University of Cape Town in 1983. She worked in the Menopause and Family Planning Clinics at Groote Schuur Hospital on a sessional basis for 10 years. She set up the first Well Woman Practice in Cape Town in 1989 with Dr Katja Soeters. She is in part-time practice in Constantia, concentrating on well woman care.*

Menopause causes significant distress in approximately 60% of menopausal women, and we need to be able to give these women clear and sage advice on treatment. The advent of hormone replacement therapy (HRT) solved the problems of many menopausal women. Or did it? Menopause was a neglected part of women's health until recent times and women who were suffering were largely ignored. Now we know that HRT is the most effective treatment of menopausal symptoms, but the recent wave of unfavourable reports has resulted in insecurity and uncertainty about safety.

Recently when a driver overtook me on a blind rise, into the face of an oncoming taxi, it occurred to me that there is all this worry about taking HRT, when in fact we risk dying in an accident every time we get into a car or taxi! And many doctors are faced with the incongruous situation of discussing the risks of HRT with a woman smoker. What we need to do is to put risk into perspective. I think prescribers of drugs for erectile dysfunction have achieved this. I hope the same objectivity may one day be applied to hormone replacement.

Hopefully, this issue of *CME* will clear up any misconceptions doctors may have about HRT usage. The studies so negatively reported by a sensationalist media have on careful review underlined the safety of HRT use. Reporting adverse events in percentages gives rise to a completely unrealistic sense of actual risk. Looking at the results, and analysing the merits of the different studies, has resulted in clear guidelines with regard to prescribing. Professor Davey has carefully outlined the actual risks and benefits of using HRT, which should help rational decision making.

The two most common reported reasons for a symptomatic woman not seeking relief are fear of weight gain, and fear of breast cancer. Professor Tessa van der Merwe has put the myth of HRT and weight gain elegantly and clearly to rest with her outstanding article.

Debate rages about type, dose and route of administration of HRT and the role of progestogens has come under particular scrutiny. It is clear that progestogens play a significant, if not clearly understood, role in breast cancer on HRT. Dr Mike Davey has explained the role of the different progestogens, and the choices we can offer our patients.

The impact of 'natural' treatments for menopause is huge, and we need to know what our patients are taking. It is equally important to know about the risks and benefits of all these treatments. Professor Ernst Sonnendecker has expertly undertaken this subject.

Most of us experience problems in managing menopausal symptoms, so hopefully this information will be of use within the framework of information and personal choice. While we need to encourage lifestyle changes that can enhance quality of life, we would be failing our patients if we did not take the time to fully understand the controversies surrounding menopausal treatment. After all, menopause will happen to half the human race!

I hope this issue will be of interest, and placate the fears many prescribing doctors have regarding treatment. I also hope it helps doctors assist their patients to make a rational, careful and informed choice.