Less is More

High-tech homeopathy may boost immune function

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Dilute. Shake. Repeat. Cryptic bartending instructions? No, it's the process for making a homeopathic medicine. And it's very of-the-moment because small new trials show that PWAs given a set of four such highly diluted potions -- called Cell Signal Enhancers (CSEs) -- had CD4 cell stabilization, small viral load decreases, and improved scores on a standard measure of bodywide inflammation and infection. They also experienced increases in weight and body cell mass, and better nervous system function.

Is this for real? Well, skeptics abound when the topic is homeopathy. After all, it's based on a little something called the Law of Similars: Let like be cured by like. Huh? OK, it means that the same substance that causes a symptom at a high dose may, when given at a much lower dose, reduce the symptom by evoking a healing response.

And in the case of the proposed HIV treatment, former National Institutes of Health researcher Barbara Brewitt, PhD -- the developer of CSEs -- and her University of Washington colleagues believe that these substances may be able to restore the "communication" between immune and nervous system cells that is fundamentally disrupted in PWAs, enabling the body to better control the virus.

A stumbling block in most scientists' path toward belief in homeopathy is the fact that the starting substances are often so diluted that there is little, if any, left in the final remedy. However, last year, physicists at the University of California reported in *Science* what they call IE (pronounced "icy") crystals -- crystalline mirror images that form around a substance being diluted and retain their shape even after the original molecules have vanished. A recent lab study showed that IE crystals activate specific immune responses depending on the substance being diluted. Brewitt proposes that IE crystals in the CSEs might balance the electromagnetic forces in the body, thereby normalizing immune and nervous-system function and potentially blocking HIV's ability to infect cells.

Which would all add up to a lot of technobabble if it weren't for actual results in PWAs. Long-term follow-up of 26 people in the first trial is certainly intriguing. Comparing the seven people who continued on the CSEs for three years to the 14 people who switched to combination antiretroviral therapy, no differences are seen in CD4 or CD8 changes (which increased or stabilized in both groups) or viral loads (which decreased comparably in both). Plus, all five people who chose to

neither continue CSEs nor switch to antiretrovirals had declines in CD4s, increases in viral loads and occurrences of opportunistic infections.

And people on the CSEs just plain felt better. Phoenix PWA Brent Butler gained a much-needed 10 pounds after beginning the remedies and says, “I feel a change in my body when I take the drops, and they’ve definitely improved my energy.”

Brewitt’s explanation for all these good effects falls back on that Law of Similars. She created the formula for the CSEs by starting with the cell-produced proteins -- cytokines -- that worsen HIV disease when overproduced by the body: Too-high insulin-like growth factor (IGF-1) suppresses immune function and raises sedimentation rates. An overabundance of platelet-derived growth factor (PDGF-BB) causes enlarged lymph nodes. Too much transforming growth factor-beta (TGF-beta) suppresses immune function. And over-the-top levels of granulocyte-macrophage colony stimulating factor (GM-CSF) greatly increase HIV replication. Giving a highly diluted mix of these does the opposite, educating the immune system to help destroy the virus. Or so the theory goes.

And it can remain only a theory until much larger trials confirm the benefits so far seen. Luckily, a larger (100-person) double-blind placebo-controlled trial is now under way in seven cities. An early analysis has found encouraging trends, so stay tuned for the final results. Meanwhile, for those who just can’t wait, the CSEs are available at a monthly cost of about $120. The dose: 10 drops of each remedy under the tongue three times a day. Now, let’s just hope that the “raging fire” of HIV doesn’t melt those icy crystals.

CSEs are available through the Boston Buyers Club (800.435.5586), the Houston Buyers Club (800.350.2392) and the producers, BioMed Comm (888.637.3516). Anyone interested in enrolling in the clinical trial in Los Angeles, San Diego, New York or Seattle can also contact BioMed Comm.

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