Study shows link between anti-obesity drugs and lung disorder

An international study conducted by Dr. Lucien Abenhaim, director of the Centre for Epidemiology and Community Studies at the JGH, concluded that a class of drugs used to fight obesity may cause a rare but potentially fatal disease called primary pulmonary hypertension (PPI). The disease results in reduced blood flow through the lungs, which, in turn, can lead to heart failure.

Results of the study, which focussed primarily on the drugs fenfluramine and dexfenfluramine, were published in the New England Journal of Medicine.

After examining 95 cases of PPH and 355 controls in France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Britain, Dr. Abenhaim and his colleagues found that the risk of contracting the disease is increased 23 times for people who use appetite suppressants for longer than three months. Given the popularity of anti-obesity drugs such as Redux, approved for use both in Canada and the United States, and the fact that little is known about their long term effects, Dr. Abenhaim suggested that an epidemiological surveillance should be organized in order to detect, as early as possible, an increased incidence of PPH in these countries.

JGH cardiologist Dr. David Langluben, an expert in the treatment of PPH, and co-investigator in the study, also urged caution in the use of anti-obesity drugs. He noted that PPH, which can strike people in their 30s and 40s, is difficult to diagnose because symptoms do not appear until there has been significant damage to the lung circulation.

Researcher awarded prestigious grant

Dr. Huyn Hung, a researcher at the hospital’s Lady Davis Institute for Medical Research (LDI), has been awarded a $286,000 grant from the prestigious U.S. Army Breast Cancer Research Program. Proposals for innovative research programs related to meaningful progress in the battle against breast cancer were solicited and more than 2500 applications were received from researchers around the world. Fewer than 10% of them were successful in obtaining grants.

Dr. Hung’s research study concerns novel growth inhibitors that may be useful in devising new treatments for breast cancers that do not respond to currently available hormonal therapies.

Dr. Hung is a project director at the LDI, and he continues to collaborate with Dr. Michal Pollak, whose laboratory he joined four years ago as a post doctoral research fellow. He has been appointed assistant professor in the Department of Experimental Medicine at McGill University and is a member of the JGH Department of Oncology Cancer Prevention Research Unit.

Community education lecture draws a crowd

"Abuse of Seniors: Intervention Options" was the topic of a public lecture held at the hospital. Pictured here are the experts who discussed various facets of the problem: moderator Dr. Sylvia Windholz, physician in the JGH Division of Geriatrics (left), Daphne Nahmiash, professor, McGill University School of Social Work; Dr. Françoise Jasserand, physicist; Maxine Lithwick, coordinator, social gerontology services, CLSC René-Cassir.

A recent study has indicated that 4% of seniors in Canada are victims of abuse and neglect, most often at the hands of family members. Unfortunately, many victims are too ashamed to seek help, while others fear reprisal from or abandonment by their adult children. The speakers encouraged concerned family members and victims of elder abuse to contact their local CLSC or speak to a professional such as a family doctor or nurse.

Another resource is a special CLSC René-Cassir information line: 489-ABUS (2287).

AMI-Québec – 20 years of support to families of people with mental illness

When May Gruman's child was diagnosed with a mental illness in 1976, it was difficult to get explanations or advice from the medical profession, and she had no one to turn to for support or for answers to her many questions. In those days, parents, especially mothers, were made to feel that they were responsible for their children's mental illness, she said. Moreover, parents were rarely informed about the diagnosis or what medications their children needed to take. The anxiety of dealing with mental illness was compounded by the frustrations of dealing with the medical system.

Formed own support group

Devastated by her child's illness, Mrs. Gruman felt the need to speak with other parents in similar situations. A shy person by nature, she nevertheless called everywhere, trying to find a support group for parents of children diagnosed with mental illness. When she discovered that no such group existed, she started one of her own. At the beginning, a few couples met regularly in each others' homes to share their concerns, to talk about the shame, the fear, the anxiety, and to break the silence surrounding mental illness.

Sylvia Klein, one of the founding members of the group recalled, "When I met May, I told her things that I had never told anyone before. I learned that I was not alone." Shortly after these meetings began, Mrs. Gruman read a series of articles about mental illness in the Montreal Star. She asked the reporter if he would be interested in finding out what happens when mentally ill patients return home to their families. After the article was published, 30 people attended the support group meeting. Jil Diogughar, the reporter who wrote this story, later became a psychiatrist, and the founding members of AMI-Québec say that they are grateful to him for bringing the problem of mental illness out into the open.

The next step was finding a permanent location for the group to hold their meetings. Mrs. Gruman approached Dr. Henry Kravitz, then chief of the JGH Department of Psychiatry, and now Emeritus Chief, who agreed to allow the group to meet, on a regular basis, in our Institute of Community and Family Psychiatry. "These accommodations were instrumental in keeping our group going. It was a gift from the hospital to us, and we are forever grateful to Dr. Kravitz," said Mrs. Gruman.

Professionals become involved

In 1977, the group was incorporated as the Association of Relatives and Friends of the Mentally Ill and registered as a charitable organization. Social workers were invited to attend the meetings, and they, in turn, helped spread the word among their colleagues. Gradually, health care professionals began referring families of their patients to the group. In 1984, its name was changed to AMI-Québec Alliance for the Mentally Ill, to reflect its affiliation with the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill in the U.S. Six years later, thanks to a grant from the Quebec government and successful fundraising efforts, a coordinator was hired.

This year, AMI-Québec is celebrating its 20th anniversary. What began as a small group of four couples meeting on a monthly basis in each other’s living rooms has evolved into an 850 member support and advocacy organization of families and friends of people with mental illness. “We try to be flexible and respond to the needs of our members,” noted President Kay Simpson, in the 1996 Annual Report. Last year, the organization responded to requests from more than 3500 people. As well, 150 health care professionals have joined as associate members.

The goals of AMI-Québec are: to offer support and guidance to families struggling to cope with mental illness; to restore self-confidence and overcome the stigma, discrimination and misconceptions surrounding mental illness and its victims; to advocate for quality care and individualized treatment for the mentally ill; to encourage research in the treatment and rehabilitation of people with mental illness; and to participate in the cure of the disease.

AMI-Québec offers monthly meetings open to the public, providing information about various aspects of mental illness (research, legal issues, treatment, medication, family relationships), nine monthly support groups led by trained facilitators, education programs, outreach, an annual seminar organized in conjunction with the psychiatry departments of Montreal hospitals, and a Siblings and Adult Children’s Network. A newsletter, published quarterly, provides timely information on new developments and updates on AMI-Québec programs. The organization also acts as an advocate for the needs of the mentally ill and their families. Given the rapid changes in our health care system, this advocacy role is becoming increasingly important.

"There are many victims of mental illness - siblings, parents, friends are all influenced by it. There is no disgrace in talking about it and asking for help. We are here to take the fear and mystery away from mental illness," explains Ellis Amic, Executive Director of AMI-Québec.

If you would like more information, please call 486-1448.