

What can we learn from the recent HRT scare?

asks Sara Eames

The recent publicity given to the use of hormone replacement therapy (HRT) has left many women and their doctors unsure as to the best course of action to deal with menopausal symptoms. It is certainly disconcerting when perceived medical wisdom changes so rapidly, for until quite recently HRT was promoted as the answer to so many of the problems that we face, not only during the menopause, but as we age too.

First this year was the dramatic headline that HRT increased the risk of both breast cancer and heart attacks and then within a few weeks one of the chief investigators in this trial claimed that many women had come off HRT unnecessarily and the risks were not as bad as first reported. What are we to think and who should we believe?

History of HRT

The background to HRT is an interesting one. Initially only oestrogen replacement

was given. However, after a while, there was fairly clear evidence that the use of oestrogen alone, while reducing menopausal symptoms, gave an increased risk of uterine cancer and so combined oestrogen and progesterone treatment became standard as this reduced the risk to the uterus. Unfortunately, it makes it far harder to study the effects of HRT as oestrogen and progesterone have differing effects on various organs and the picture of risks and benefits become more complicated.

Nonetheless there has been gradually increasing evidence that there are serious side effects from the combined treatment and there is little doubt now that taking combined HRT leads to an increased risk of breast cancer, heart disease, strokes and deep vein thrombosis. In the past there has been a lot of publicity related to the long-term health benefits of HRT, particularly to prevent osteoporosis (the thinning of

the bones which can lead to repeated bone fractures and deformities of the spine), protect against heart disease and reduce the risk of dementia. This evidence is also thrown into question by recent studies which raise difficult questions both for doctors and concerned women.

How big is the risk?

Can we pick out people who are more at risk than others? Is the risk worth taking?

When can HRT still be recommended?

It seems to be a bit of a surprise to the medical profession, but not to homeopaths, that one treatment is not necessarily the best for everybody with the same condition. In weighing up the pros and cons of HRT for an individual person, the most important factors to take into consideration include the severity of the menopausal symptoms in the first place, the preferences of the patient ►

Conflicting reports about the risks of HRT have left many women confused

and the medical history of both the woman herself and her family.

Some people do suffer horrendously from hot flushes, sweats, low energy and mood problems during the menopause and do not always respond completely to general lifestyle advice and homeopathic remedies. I have a few patients who have felt so ghastly that they would happily run the increased risk of serious disease later on in life as they felt that life was not worth living anyhow the way they were.

If a woman already has risk factors for breast cancer or heart disease, such as a personal or strong family history of the disease, or is a heavy smoker, then taking HRT would increase the risk further and should only be used as a last resort, for as short a time as possible. Indeed the most recent medical advice is that HRT should only be used for short periods of time, when menopausal symptoms are severe, and that it should not be used to prevent bone

thinning or as a general “anti-ageing” treatment.

What can we learn from this recent confusion?

The first thing I thought about this recent publicity was that drug trials are not quite the scientific truth that we are lead to believe. Homeopathy has suffered recently from the criticism that there is not enough scientific evidence of its effect and yet what sort of real truth can these trials be producing if their findings and recommendations change every few weeks and leave us all confused?

It also seemed clear that statistics can be easily misunderstood. There were worrying headlines such as 30 per cent increased risk of breast cancer. At first sight this could be thought to mean that an extra 30 per cent of women on HRT will develop the disease. In fact it means nothing of the sort. Rather that 30 per cent more women will suffer from breast cancer than before. This is still quite a small

number of women as the initial risk was very low.

We know a certain amount about the way each person regulates their hormonal balance, with a complicated series of feedback mechanisms, but there is, I am sure, even more that we do not know about the way this intricate system functions. It should therefore come as no surprise that by crudely manipulating the system by adding artificial hormones that there are far reaching and inexplicable results. It is a great example of the dangers of reductionist, allopathic medicine which tries to control and manipulate by prescribing substances, without understanding the possible effect on all the different parts of the body. Any such treatment, when necessary, should be kept to a minimum.

HRT

Recently there has been even more discussion about various aspects of the recent trials and there have been some suggestions that the group of women who took oestrogen alone did not have an increased risk of breast cancer. It is now being recommended that women who wish to take HRT and have had a hysterectomy can safely be prescribed oestrogen. I find this intuitively highly worrying as the one thing that we do know fairly surely is that many breast cancers are sensitive to oestrogen, and that Tamoxifen, which is an oestrogen blocker is effective in helping to treat breast cancer. This is surely yet more evidence that we should not rely solely on the results of a clinical trial to change such serious medical recommendations.

Homeopathic treatment of menopausal symptoms

If your symptoms are not too severe it is well worth trying a simple, over the counter homeopathic medicine.

If you feel there are other health issues as well, or you do not respond to the medicine, you should seek an appointment with a qualified homeopath.

Medicines which I have found to be very effective, taken as needed in a 12c potency, include:

- Sulphur for burning flushes, associated with redness and skin eruptions and a craving for sweets.
- Lachesis for frequent flushes with a bright red face, perspiration and a variable energy level, fluctuating from extreme exhaustion to over activity and talkativeness. It is often

associated with the inability to stand tight clothing, especially around the neck.

- Sepia for exhausting flushes with a lot of perspiration, but less change of colour. Often helpful when there is also back ache and a sense of the womb dropping down. A sepia person often feels worn out but picks up once they start doing things, such as exercise, especially dancing, and seeing friends.
- Amyl nitrate is the medicine I have found best for bursting, throbbing headaches associated with flushes. Usually the upper body is very hot from the flushes but other body parts can be freezing at the same time.

Editor *Anne Coates*' description of how homeopathy had helped her daughter in the last issue, prompted *Bernard Cooper* to write about his life-long commitment to this powerful medicine

My introduction to homeopathy was an intellectual conversion. I moved in the 1950s to the Home Counties to live with my sister who had a homeopathic doctor and kept a few remedies at home. At the time, I ridiculed this "quack medicine" with its little pills!

Moving to a neighbouring town I lodged with a Scottish lady. She been tubercular in her early years and had received great benefit then from a homeopath. She was a keen supporter of the Missionary School of Medicine and had many books, including, Neatby's *Manual of Homœotherapeutics* (the MSoM textbook), and Tyler's *Homœopathic Drug Pictures*. I began to read these and realised for the first time what a rational system homeopathy was, and also what a vast amount of experimental work had been put in by these old masters. I was hooked, and since then (except after accidents) I have had no other treatment, nor taken any conventional medicine, although my health had never been robust.

I began to study homeopathy seriously, and my landlady and I often visited the RLHH for functions and lectures. I was soon involved in the practical side when I became engaged to a local girl who suffered much from ulcers in her mouth. These were long-lasting and made eating a problem. She had received

any amount of treatment and local applications and finally a London hospital removed all her amalgam fillings and replaced them with gold, but to no effect. I still have the notes I made at the time, which record that I gave her Hepar sulph, from which she had a textbook aggravation, followed by a complete cure. I can testify to this as I was married to her for 23 years.

Homeopathy continued to play an important role in our lives. When our first child was a few months old I was awakened by my desperate wife holding a screaming child. His face was bright red, hot and dry with staring eyes — the classic picture of Belladonna. The administration of this drug was the most dramatic thing I have ever witnessed. Within one minute he stopped screaming and went to sleep, waking perfectly normal in the morning.

After the death of my first wife I remarried. My new wife had suffered from pulmonary TB in her twenties, for which she had the standard treatment in a TB hospital and had surgery to remove part of her lung. Ever since then she had had a persistent and troublesome short cough. I worked out that she needed Phosphorus and that put paid to the cough permanently — I've been married to her for 20 years.

Now in my eighties I am still relying on homeopathy to look after myself and my



As a young man Bernard ridiculed homeopathy, now he's a passionate advocate

wife. My family of five children and ten grandchildren often turn to me for advice. I have written some articles for magazines and give the occasional lecture. I never cease to wonder at the prodigious labours of Hahnemann, Kent, Allen, Burnett, Clarke and the rest who have bequeathed to us such a legacy, and am glad that there are those today who are following in their footsteps.

If you have a personal experience of homeopathy that you would like to share, please send it to the editor at the address on page 3. Contributions should be 600-700 words long and please include a daytime telephone number we can contact you on.

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