SOUTHWESTERN NEWS

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NEW DRUG TEST AIMED AT SUFFERERS OF LOU GEHRIG'S DISEASE

DALLAS — December 4, 1995 — A new drug being tested at UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas appeared in earlier studies to slow the deterioration of breathing capacity in patients suffering from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, commonly known as ALS or Lou Gehrig's disease.

ALS is believed to affect one person in 100,000, and researchers estimate there are 25,000 ALS sufferers in the United States. It is best known as the disease that struck down New York Yankee great Lou Gehrig, baseball's "Iron Horse."

"We want to see if this new round of studies bears out the results of preliminary studies of the drug Brain-Derived Neurotrophic Factor (BDNF)," said Dr. Wilson Bryan, assistant professor of neurology.

Deterioration of the motor nerves that control the muscles of respiration is what typically leads to death for ALS patients, he said. Bryan and Dr. Richard Barohn, associate professor of neurology, oversee the ALS clinic at UT Southwestern. UT Southwestern is one of 35 sites around the country and the only participant in North Texas evaluating the safety and efficacy of BDNF.

Patients will be enrolled during the next two to three months and will be followed for about nine months. Researchers hope to evaluate approximately 1,000 patients throughout the United States during the trial, with about one-third of all participants taking a placebo.

Mary Nowotny is one of the patients who will be participating in the BDNF trial. "The only way we're going to find out if drugs work is if people are willing to be part of these trials," she said.

Nowotny, who began noticing symptoms of ALS three years ago, has been coming to the UT Southwestern clinic since June 1994. Confined for the majority of the day to a motorized wheelchair, Nowotny still is able to work full time, acting as associate dean of

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academic affairs at Baylor University School of Nursing.

The UT Southwestern clinic is the largest of its kind in the region and is subsidized partially by the Muscular Dystrophy Association.

The disease's symptoms typically include the gradual "wasting away" of motor neurons that control muscles throughout the body. The mind is not affected, however. "Part of the tragedy is that patients are fully aware of what is happening to them," Bryan said.

The average life span after the onset of symptoms is two to three years. Doctors so far have been unable to offer any effective treatment to patients. The cause of the disease is not known.

In recent years, the ALS clinic at UT Southwestern has been involved in several studies to test the effectiveness of different drugs. A study of the drug Rilutek, which appeared to extend the life of some ALS sufferers by several months, recently ended. The drug manufacturer has applied for FDA approval.

BDNF is given as an injection every day and will be available at no charge. Early tests have indicated no problem with major side effects, Bryan said.

Nowotny knows that it's too early to get overly optimistic, but she's grateful for the opportunity to help test a drug that might prove effective in treating ALS. "I thought it was a good sign that when Dr. Bryan told me about the trial he was smiling. It was the first time I'd seen him smile during an exam in months," Nowotny said.

The trial is sponsored by the pharmaceutical company Amgen Regeneron Partners. For information about the UT Southwestern trial, please call (214) 648-8668.

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