

SOUTHWESTERN NEWS

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UT SOUTHWESTERN STUDY TO TEST EFFICACY OF ST. JOHN'S WORT FOR TREATMENT OF DEPRESSION

Dallas—May 5, 1999—Twenty-eight-year-old artist Leslie Kenegar has a group of her paintings that she hides in her back closet and describes as “just for me – I don’t want anybody else to know I’ve felt that way.” On her other walls, however, hang the bright paintings she’s done in her sunny moods.

What makes the difference? Kenegar thinks the answer lies with St. John’s wort, said Dr. Madhukar Trivedi, associate professor of psychiatry at UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas. He is seeking volunteers for the first controlled U.S. study of this popular plant derivative, known scientifically as hypericum, for the treatment of major depression.

Trivedi, who is a specialist in researching and treating depression, said he doesn’t know whether St. John’s wort is effectively treating Kenegar and the depression of others or not – and that’s just the point.

“The more we know about depression and its treatments the better,” he said. “Many people believe that this supplement, easily obtained in health-food stores and neighborhood pharmacies, is helpful in improving their sad, low moods. But it has not been studied in this country, and the European studies were not conducted with the same tight controls as our research at UT Southwestern.”

Although there are now several classes of drugs that work well for patients who suffer

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from depression, Trivedi said that all medications don't work for all people. "The more medications we develop, the more people we will be able to help," he said. "And patients should understand that they still need to be monitored by a physician when taking St. John's wort for depression."

St. John's wort, which has been used for mood elevation over many centuries, has grown in popularity recently, along with ginseng and other products considered natural.

Participants in the three-month study must be 18 years of age or older. Each will be given the St. John's wort drug; sertraline, a serotonin re-uptake inhibitor; or a placebo (sugar pill).

Kenegar won't be able to participate in the study because she's already taking the medication. But she said she'd be waiting to learn the outcome because she agrees with Trivedi that scientists need to learn more about natural substances that people are taking for medicinal purposes.

The National Institute of Mental Health agreed to fund the project without financial input from pharmaceutical companies.

For information on the St. John's wort study, call (214) 648-8333.

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