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******Cardiologist warns against dangers of chelation therapy.

DALLAS--Chelation therapy, a controversial drug treatment said to "cure" patients of cardiovascular disease, "is associated with a growing number of patient deaths," according to Dr. James M. Atkins, president of the American Heart Association, Texas Affiliate, and cardiologist at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas.

"Patients with atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries) are told they're cured after a series of chelation injections. But some of these people face serious illness or sudden death," says Atkins. "I know of two reported cases in Texas where chelation therapy has caused kidney failure, making it necessary for patients to go on chronic kidney dialysis."

Atkins is associate professor of Internal Medicine and co-director of Emergency Medical Education at the health science center.

Warnings of potential life-threatening complications associated with chelation therapy have been issued by several organizations that set guidelines for medical practice. Some of these groups include the American Heart Association, the National Institutes of Health and the American College of Physicians.

Atkins explains that chelation therapy, using the chelating agent "EDTA" (disodium edetate), was developed during World War II for the possibility of chemical warfare. It was specially designed for use in heavy metal poisoning.

"EDTA can rid the body of certain heavy metals, such as microscopic levels of lead that can cause brain injury and convulsions. The drug works by binding heavy metals so they can be excreted by the body," says Atkins. "Like lead, EDTA can rid the body of calcium.

"Today chelationists say they are using EDTA to take calcium out of atherosclerotic plaque. They say that calcium is the 'bone of the plaque' and that when the calcium is removed, the plaque will collapse and go away.

"Actually plaque is made up of cholesterol and scar tissue with calcium developing late after years of fibrous build-up. Calcium makes up less than one percent of plaque.

"While EDTA has never been shown to get rid of atherosclerotic plaque, what does happen is that calcium is removed from skeletal bone. If one is treated with EDTA long enough, skeletal bone will collapse. Large quantities of calcium coming from bone into the kidneys can destroy the kidneys, causing them to shut down and forcing patients to go on dialysis."

Chelation clinics are often in rural areas, outside large cities. Sometimes physicians in one part of the state run clinics in another part, he says, and some clinics are not run by licensed physicians. These clinics charge about $3,000 for one course of treatment, telling patients they are saving money since heart bypass surgery can cost as much as $25,000. "But most heart disease patients that we see are never sent to surgery and instead are maintained on drugs," says Atkins. "For every two patients for whom we recommend surgery, there are 98 to 99 who would not benefit from surgery."

Atkins says that psychological factors play a big role in the success of chelation therapy:

"The vast majority of Americans have atherosclerosis some time in their lives and

(more)

half of us will die from atherosclerosis," Atkins says. "There is no cure for atherosclerosis. All physicians can do is stabilize the patient and deal with problems as they occur. But the average heart disease patient lives eight or nine years after they develop symptoms of atherosclerosis. It is a chronic disease.

"Anyone with a chronic disease will go through times of depression as well as times when they break out of depression. If you give them something and tell them they are cured they will psychologically feel better. Our basic psychological state has a great effect on how we feel.

"There is a relatively long life-expectancy with heart disese. It is frightening and it doesn't go away.

"But people can live a long productive life after a heart attack," he says. "The best example I know is Lyndon Johnson. In 1954 he was hospitalized after a heart attack. He was in shock and had to be put on experimental drugs to keep his blood pressure up. Less than 10 percent of patients with that condition leave the hospital, and there is a 60 percent chance of dying. But LBJ lived to be president from 1963 until 1968. He didn't die until 1972."

Atkins explains that legitimate uses of drugs in this country often involve hundreds of studies to show their safety.

"Scientists use all of this research literature to give validity to their drug therapy procedures. EDTA has only been approved by the FDA for heavy metal poisoning and physicians can use an approved drug for another use only on an individual case basis. If a physician wants to use an approved drug for another reason in a large group of patients the doctor must get an investigational new drug (IND) number from the FDA. Chelation therapists have not filed for a FDA number and have not published research findings in any reputable scientific journal."

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