

SOUTHWESTERN NEWS

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PRIMARY PROGRESSIVE MS PATIENTS SOUGHT FOR DRUG TRIAL

DALLAS – March 16, 1999 – Physicians at UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas will be participating in the first-ever drug trial for patients with the most rare form of multiple sclerosis (MS), primary progressive MS.

Some patients who qualify will take daily shots of Copaxone, a drug already used for more common forms of MS, for three years. The rest of the volunteers will take a placebo.

No drug previously has been developed or tested on primary progressive MS.

MS is an autoimmune disorder that attacks the central nervous system. It damages the myelin sheath, the protective material that surrounds nerve fibers in the brain, spinal cord and optic nerves. The illness causes numbness, weakness, visual blurring and slurred speech, among other symptoms. The exact cause of MS is unknown, and there is no cure or way to prevent it.

The most common neurological disease among young adults, MS typically strikes between the ages of 20 and 40.

Eighty-five percent of MS patients suffer from relapsing/remitting MS, which brings attacks of symptoms followed by periods of recovery. But 15 percent of patients have the primary progressive form of the disease in which symptoms gradually worsen with no remissions. For primary progressive patients, there is no relief from the disease, which assaults the body at a slower but more constant rate.

While breakthroughs in recent years have brought drugs that decrease the risk of attacks in some relapsing/remitting patients, there are no drugs that slow the advancement of the disease in primary progressive patients.

The three-year trial of Copaxone, or glatiramer acetate, will involve 900 MS patients at 50 medical centers across the country. It will be the largest MS drug trial ever.

Dr. Elliot Frohman, assistant professor of neurology and ophthalmology, is director of UT Southwestern's MS program, which attracts patients from throughout the Southwest. Frohman is UT Southwestern's principal investigator for the trial.

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MS DRUG TRIAL # 2

“We’re excited that this form of MS is getting some attention,” said Frohman. “Primary progressive MS is more difficult to study because change in the patient’s condition is slower.”

Participants in the trial would need to be available for periodic clinical visits, which could include brain scans and blood work.

Multiple sclerosis, while not fatal, leads to life-altering disabilities. Patients often cannot walk or suffer from incontinence or tremors.

In the United States, 300,000 people have MS, and the National Multiple Sclerosis Society estimates 3 million worldwide have the disease. About 7,500 area residents have MS.

The Food and Drug Administration approved Copaxone to treat the relapsing/remitting form of MS in December 1996. Teva Marion Partners in Kansas City, Mo., makes Copaxone.

For more information about the study, call (214) 648-9030.

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