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Progression of Parkinson's disease

Drug treatment may slow the disease process

The prospects of the patient with Parkinson's disease have improved substantially since the advent of the dopaminergic drugs, dopamine agonists, and subcutaneous apomorphine.¹ More recently the promise, as yet unproved, of fetal cell implantation has raised further hopes.² But the bleak fact is that the disease shows inexorable progression despite treatment, and the patient suffers the on/off fluctuations, dyskinesias and dystonias, and the psychiatric morbidity induced by the drugs.

Attempts have recently been made to find ways of slowing the onset or progression of early Parkinson's disease with a view to improving the prognosis. At the onset of symptoms about 80% of dopaminergic neurones have degenerated and a proportionate loss of striatal dopamine has occurred. Research with MPTP (1-methyl-4-phenyl-1,2,3,6-tetrahydropyridine), the chemical discovered by chance as a contaminant of illicit drugs, has shown that environmental toxins can cause selective nigrostriatal damage in primates and humans. Experimental work in primates has indicated that in the case of MPTP this can be completely blocked by the prior administration of monoamine oxidase B inhibitors (for example, selegiline), which prevent the metabolism of MPTP (the protoxin) to MPP⁺, the active, highly selective dopaminergic poison.³ If environmental toxins analogous to MPTP are at work in Parkinson's disease then in theory early detection in the preclinical stage would be enormously beneficial—if a drug could be found to block this neurotoxin before neuronal damage had occurred or to arrest or retard progression.

The search for diagnostic markers is now on and has several aims: firstly, to confirm the diagnosis; secondly, to find a measure of disease activity that could be used to monitor both progression and the effects of treatment; and, finally, to detect preclinical disease, which might in turn be responsive to treatment. A vast array of biochemical and metabolic indices has been scrutinised, but at present none has proved to be clinically useful.

The recently published DATATOP (deprenyl and tocopherol antioxidant therapy of parkinsonism) trial attempted to confront these theoretically inviting concepts in early Parkinson's disease.⁴ It was based on the concept that free radicals, superoxides, and hydrogen peroxide released from degenerating neuronal proteins and neuromelanin produce toxic lipid peroxides. These cause dysfunction of cell membranes and ultimately damage the nigrostriatal pathway. In theory, therefore, the inhibition of monoamine oxidase B and of oxidative pathways might retard such toxic damage and improve the prognosis. The trial comprised 800 patients with early disease (stages 1 and 2, Hoehn and Yahr scale) aged 30 to 70 (mean age 61). Patients were not taking antiparkinsonian

drugs or were able to stop taking such drugs without deterioration. Patients with depression and dementia were excluded.

Selegiline (deprenyl) 10 mg a day or tocopherol 2000 IU a day, or both, and placebo were used in a double blind design. The end points were the time interval from randomisation until the "blinded" investigator judged levodopa necessary, or two years of treatment. At one year 176 controls but only 97 patients treated with selegiline had been deemed in need of levodopa, a 57% reduction. Projected times for each group to reach the end point were 15 months for controls and 26 months for those receiving deprenyl (I Shoulson, symposium on the recent advances in the treatment of Parkinson's disease, London, 1990). No decline was noted during one month when treatment with selegiline was stopped. The data on tocopherol have not yet been analysed. Similar results were obtained by Tetrad and Langston in 27 patients with early disease given selegiline 10 mg a day and 27 matched patients given placebo in a randomised double blind trial.⁵ The time before levodopa was deemed necessary was increased from 312 days in those receiving placebo to 549 days in those receiving selegiline.

There are several possible explanations for these findings. Possibly, selegiline may simply improve symptoms and so seems to bridle progression over two years; or it may exert a protective effect against some persistent unknown environmental toxin that is damaging the nigral cells; or it may prevent the expected decline in the established disease process.

These results have yet to be confirmed. The end point is to some extent subjective. The half life of selegiline is more than 24 hours, but side effects are inconspicuous—with no "cheese reactions" as seen with monoamine oxidase A inhibitors. The drug has an additional advantage in that it smooths out the on/off swings, particularly reducing the off periods in patients with more advanced disease. These promising but preliminary results justify the prescription of selegiline 10 mg each morning to patients with early disease, especially the younger ones, in the hope of impeding progression.

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