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Dr. Anthony Traboulsee, the director of the UBC MS Clinical Trials Research Group, says there has been a large demand for research on the Italian MS theory.

UBC researchers planning to study MS vein theory

CTV.ca News Staff

A medical centre in British Columbia says it wants to become the first in the country to test the controversial theory that multiple sclerosis patients have blocked veins, preventing proper blood flow from the brain.

"There's a large demand for us to look into this," Dr. Anthony Traboulsee told CTV News. "Patients are very excited. We are very interested ourselves, and we want to meet the demand of our patients."

A group of researchers at the University of British Columbia MS Clinic, part of the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority, are planning to study the theory, using a variety of imaging techniques. If it gets approval and funding, it appears to be the most comprehensive examination of this novel theory in the world.

They will be studying the findings of Italian researcher Dr. Paolo Zamboni, who believes that blocked veins in the neck and chest of MS patients lead to blood drainage problems and triggers the immune responses that mark the disease.

Zamboni contends that angioplasty surgery on these blocked veins, a procedure he calls the Liberation Treatment, can then open them. A preliminary study of the treatment in 65 patients showed it improved the quality of life for many patients, and as long as the veins remained open, symptoms of MS were reduced and new attacks were halted.

The BC team envisions a study that begins with MS patients being scanned for abnormalities, likely using the ultrasound test pioneered in Italy. They would also be given MRI scans, to see how the different tests detect possible problems. The prevalence of vein problems would also be assessed in MS patients and in normal healthy control patients. Data would also be blinded to minimize the risk for bias in the research.

Once these non-invasive scans have been done, test patients would proceed to the angiography suite. There they would undergo a venogram. That's where a probe is inserted, from the groin, into the vein system that travels through the chest and into the neck. Doctors inject a dye and watch the blood-flow. This is also, according the University of Ferrara team, the definitive way of seeing blockages in the jugular veins in the neck and the azygos vein in the chest.

And if there are blocked or narrowed veins, the UBC researchers want to open them up to see what happens.

"Not only do we want to see if we can detect these abnormalities, we also want to see, if we change them, does it improve peoples' lives?" said Traboulsee.

The B.C. researchers, who include radiologists, vascular specialists, and physicists working on new imaging technologies, say they had heard about the theory before CTV's W5 aired a story describing the theory, and were investigating the possibility of a study.

But interest in the theory in Canada has exploded since the episode aired.

A professor of neurosurgery at the University of Buffalo, Dr. Robert Zivadinov, who worked on an early study with Zamboni, says his office was contacted by 8,000 MS patients in the three weeks

after the W5 episode aired.

The Vancouver researchers want to determine the prevalence of the vein abnormality, which Zamboni has dubbed CCSVI -- or chronic cerebrospinal venous insufficiency. They also want to know how easily it can be detected with ultrasound and MRI testing.

Joining the study will be Alex Rauscher, a physicist. He hopes to look at MRI scans of patients to search for evidence of iron deposits in the brain, since some research has suggested that iron in the brain may contribute to the inflammation and the immune system attacks that mark MS.

"It is our duty to find the answers," said Rauscher.

The Vancouver Coastal Health researchers say they have applied for funding from the MS Society of Canada to fund research to determine the most practical and reliable test for CCSVI. But because of the size and scope of the study -- and their desire to begin quickly -- they are also accepting funding from other agencies and private donations.

Donations should be directed to:

VGH and UBC Hospital Foundation

UBC Faculty of Medicine (funds can be specified for CCSVI research)

The researchers note that their study is not accepting patients yet and likely won't for a few months until they acquire funding, obtain ethical approval, and develop an MRI and ultrasound testing protocol.

Patients are asked to refrain from contacting the clinics until they are ready to proceed with the study.

Meanwhile in Italy, one of the companies that manufactures the ultrasound machines used in the testing for CCSVI, is beginning to hold training sessions for doctors and technicians who want to learn the novel technique for scanning the neck and head.

One training program is being held this week at the University of Ferrara with technicians who developed the tests, and with Zamboni. A second session is planned for March.

Contact information for the course is available through: Claudio.Buffagni@esaote.com

With added files from producer Elizabeth St. Philip and CTV.ca's Angela Mulholland

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