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Second MS study finds high rate of blocked veins

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Buffalo scientists call preliminary work promising

Patients with multiple sclerosis are more than twice as likely to show a narrowing of the veins as healthy people, new research shows, a finding that lends credence to the theory of an Italian researcher whose study on the degenerative condition has stirred a range of emotions.

Blocked or narrowed veins that restrict blood flow from the brain were prevalent in 56 per cent of patients with MS and 22 per cent of healthy control subjects, say researchers in Buffalo.

The study, which involved 500 participants, aims to determine whether a condition dubbed by Paolo Zamboni as chronic cerebrospinal venous insufficiency (CCSVI) is a major risk factor for MS.

Dr. Zamboni's early finding that MS may be caused by vein blockages that lead to a buildup of iron in the brain has sparked both hope and controversy. It is a departure from current thinking that MS is an autoimmune condition in which the immune system attacks myelin, a fatty substance that coats nerve cells.

The Buffalo researchers cautioned yesterday that their work, which has not been peer-reviewed, is preliminary, although they acknowledge that it is encouraging.

"The data is very promising in terms of trying to understand this condition," said principal investigator Robert Zivadinov, an associate professor of neurology at the University of Buffalo. "Thousands of studies will be done to understand the importance and the consequences of the CCSVI in MS. I think our study is, probably after Dr. Zamboni's, the first important step to say 'Hey, there is really something there. [It's] very important and it should be further investigated.'"

The study involved 290 MS patients, as well as healthy adults and those with other neurological diseases.

Unlike Dr. Zamboni's findings, the percentage of MS patients with CCSVI was much lower in the Buffalo study. Dr. Zamboni found that in 90 per cent of people with MS, including his spouse, the veins draining blood from the brain were malformed or blocked.

He also found that in people without MS, the veins were not blocked - contrary to the findings of the Buffalo group.

Dr. Zivadinov, who will present his findings at the American Academy of Neurology meeting in April, said further research is needed. In the second phase of the study, he plans on using more advanced diagnostic tools.

Speaking from the U.S., Dr. Zamboni said the results are heartening. "This confirms there is a highly significant difference between MS patients and controls ... and that it [CCSVI] is a major risk of development."

Dr. Zamboni, a professor of medicine at the University of Ferrara, had 65 of his patients undergo angioplasty to clear blockages. Of those patients, 50 per cent reported no attacks in the next 18 months. In a control group that did not have the surgery, the rate was 27 per cent.

Many in the medical community have been skeptical of his work because it is preliminary, with a small sample size, and has been heavily promoted before going through the rigorous research process.

In Canada, the MS Society is receiving proposals for projects, and will make funding announcements in June.

With a report from Avis Favaro at CTV

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