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Thalidomide substitute could be disease fighter

Jim Ritter

Thalidomide, a drug once banned because it caused horrific birth defects, has become something of a miracle drug.

About 10,000 patients in the United States--including former House member and vice presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro--are taking thalidomide for cancer, arthritis, lupus, leprosy, AIDS symptoms and other conditions.

Now, researchers are developing thalidomide substitutes that could provide the benefits of the dangerous drug, without the terrible side effects.

"We hope very soon to retire thalidomide forever and replace it with better drugs," said Dr. Azra Raza of Rush-Presbyterian-St. Luke's Medical Center.

Raza is beginning a clinical trial of a thalidomide substitute called Revimid for patients with a rare blood disorder called myelodysplastic syndrome, or MDS. The disease causes anemia and fatigue, and develops into leukemia in about one-third of patients.

In an earlier study, Raza reported that 16 of 83 MDS patients were helped significantly by thalidomide. Among them is Charlene Brown of Gary.

Brown, 67, was so fatigued and anemic she required repeated blood transfusions. Since going on thalidomide two years ago, Brown said, she hasn't needed further transfusions, and her fatigue "has subsided quite a bit."

Thalidomide was a popular treatment in the late 1950s and early 1960s for pregnant women suffering from insomnia and nausea. More than 10,000 babies in 46 countries were born with defects--often grotesque--attributed to thalidomide. Some had no arms or legs. Others had flappers extending from their shoulders or toes extending from their hips. They also had missing ears, genital abnormalities and heart and kidney problems.

In 1998, the Food and Drug Administration approved thalidomide for leprosy sores, and since then, doctors have been prescribing the drug "off label" for other conditions. Thalidomide also is being studied in more than 200 clinical trials. It costs about \$10,000 for one year's worth

Any thalidomide patient capable of becoming pregnant must have a pregnancy test before starting the drug and use two contraceptive methods or not have intercourse. Male patients must use condoms.

Thalidomide also can cause drowsiness, dizziness, constipation and tingling or numbness in hands and feet that could be permanent.

Celgene Corp., which sells thalidomide under the brand name Thalomid, has developed three substitutes by slightly altering the chemical structure of thalidomide. In preliminary clinical trials, Revimid appears to be more potent than thalidomide and does not cause drowsiness. And unlike thalidomide, Revimid does not cause birth defects in rabbits.

For information on the Rush-Presbyterian trial, call (312) 563-2538.

---- **Index References** ----

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