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NORFOLK-BASED ORGANIZATION LAUDS DISCOVERY OF POSSIBLE USE OF CHOLESTEROL DRUGS TO TREAT BRAIN BLOOD VESSEL DISORDER

University of Utah researchers say statins may offer first easy, inexpensive therapy for CCM

NORFOLK – Norfolk-based Angioma Alliance is lauding a finding that could save thousands of lives a year. University of Utah School of Medicine researchers have shown that a blood vessel disorder leading to unpredictable, sometimes fatal hemorrhagic strokes, seizures, paralysis or other problems may be treatable with the same statin drugs that millions of people take to control high cholesterol.

According to Connie Lee, President of Angioma Alliance, “This finding may herald a new age for the treatment of cavernous angiomas or cerebral cavernous malformations (CCM).”

“Brain surgery has been the only option for CCM patients. But because of the risks in those operations, neurosurgeons are reluctant to perform them unless the patient is in immediate danger,” University of Utah cardiologist Dean Y. Li, M.D., Ph.D., Director of the Molecular Medicine Program and the study’s corresponding author said. “Our study proposes a potential strategy for a simple drug therapy that could cost only a few dollars a month at a pharmacy. If the results of a study in mice are confirmed in a pilot trial with people, statins could provide a safe, inexpensive treatment for CCM.” Results of the University of Utah study with mice were published January 18, 2008 in *Nature Medicine* online.

Connie Lee notes, “CCM is a common but little known illness that can strike with devastating consequences for individuals in any stage of life. The disease has affected the strongest amongst us, including prominent athletes such as the Olympic superstar, Florence Griffith Joyner, and the Tour De France champion, Alberto Contador.” It is a disorder in which blood vessels in the brain become dilated and weakened, and leak blood, causing strokes, headaches, seizures or other problems. “Diagnosing CCM can be problematic. Some people are diagnosed after experiencing symptoms and undergoing an MRI; others find out they have CCM during an MRI for an unrelated problem,” said Dr. Li.

Angioma Alliance has been working for more than six years to bring together patients, researchers, and healthcare providers. The organization was founded in 2002 by Connie Lee, Psy.D., a clinical psychologist whose young daughter is affected by the illness. Dr. Lee states, “Our members around the world are heartened by the commitment and progress being made by scientists and physicians to understand this disease and hope that it will translate to new treatment strategies.”

There still is work to be done before statins can be used to treat CCM in humans. Dr. Li notes, "Our animal studies must first be evaluated in a pilot clinical trial, which Dr. Whitehead and others are initiating." Kevin J. Whitehead, M.D., a cardiologist who is also at the University of Utah, is recruiting 50 to 100 people diagnosed with CCM to join a pilot trial of statins.

Although the precise number of people with CCM is not known, it's estimated up to 0.5 percent of the U.S. population or about 1.5 million people may have some form of CCM. CCM can be inherited genetically or occur sporadically. Three known genes have been associated with genetic-related CCM, but the role of those genes, CCM1, CCM2, and CCM3, has been unclear. Whitehead and Li demonstrated that without CCM2, the endothelium, a thin, inner lining of cells that forms a blood vessel's tubular passage for blood flow, does not form properly. When that happens, blood vessels can become weak and dilated, allowing them to leak.

Whitehead and Li demonstrated in mice that simvastatin (Zocor) strengthened the damaged blood vessels in the mice. They suspect statins, such as Zocor, Lipitor, and similar drugs, treat CCM by stabilizing blood vessels so they don't leak. Dr. Whitehead says, "Statin therapy particularly could benefit people who are genetically predisposed to CCM."

The pilot study is recruiting patients who are known to have the hereditary form of the illness. Interested physicians and patients should contact Kevin Whitehead at the University of Utah (Kevin.whitehead@hsc.utah.edu) or Connie Lee (clee@AngiomaAlliance.org). For more information about CCM, visit www.AngiomaAlliance.org.

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