

THE PALM BEACH POST

HEALTH NOTES WEDNESDAY - DEC. 5, 1990

Therapy may prevent repeat heart attacks

Palm Beach Post Wire Services

For heart patients with blocked arteries, the battle to survive is not won with a bypass operation alone.

Such patients remain at very high risk of having a heart attack and often need further treatment with cholesterol-fighting drugs.

As the result of studies showing the drugs' effectiveness, cardiologists throughout the United States now are using the combinations of drugs in what is known as "aggressive therapy" to combat coronary artery disease.

Those practicing it include Dr. David Meyerson at University of Maryland Medical Center and Dr. Michael Miller at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore.

They are using cholesterol-lowering drugs such as lovastatin, which as recently as two years ago was thought to be unsafe. Since then, however, studies have shown that this and other drugs can be used effectively, without damaging side effects.

"This therapy does not make heart disease disappear, but it improves it and has the effect of preventing other critical events," says Meyerson, director of the University of Maryland's Center for Preventive Cardiology.

"When someone already has heart disease, a physician has to be aggressive or else his patient is just

going to have heart attack after heart attack and he's going to die."

It is important to realize that once a person has had a heart attack, the risk for repeat coronary events is five or six times greater than before the first attack, says Miller of the Hopkins Center for Preventive Cardiology.

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in America. Statistics show there are 7.2 million people in the United States who have heart disease, and about 500,000 of them die of heart attacks every year. A like number survive attacks but go on to have repeat episodes.

"We think if a person has a high cholesterol, that we need to bring it down," he says. "But we just start off slowly because you have to monitor the patient."

Cardiologists have become more prone to use cholesterol-lowering drugs to prevent repeat episodes of life-threatening attacks ever since Dr. Greg Brown of the University of Washington Medical School last year reported his early findings about the effectiveness of such treatment.

A full account of his work over the last four years was published recently in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

"Brown's work is monumental," Miller says, explaining that Brown's study showed that using the drugs can help reduce the lesions that clog the arteries.

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