

Patients ^{A.I.D.S.} skeptical of cures

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By TOM LONG
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SANTA CRUZ — For people with AIDS, the false hope of a miracle cure can be almost as maddening as having no cure at all. And those false hopes get raised regularly.

"I decided a long time ago that if I got excited every time some cure came down the pike it would drive me crazy," said Tom Graves, a Santa Cruz man with AIDS.

Still, Graves and thousands of other people with AIDS across the country closely followed news reports in recent weeks of a procedure called hyperthermia.

Cable News Network broadcast a story earlier this month about the treatment, which involves heating a patient's blood outside his body to presumably kill off cancer cells and viruses.

A team of doctors in Atlanta reported that after hyperthermia treatment, one AIDS patient had completely recovered from the AIDS-driven Kaposi's sarcoma cancer which was killing him. Beyond that, it was reported, the patient no longer even tested positive for the HIV virus which causes AIDS.

Within days, hundreds of people, including some local AIDS patients, were desperately trying to reach the physicians, fighting for a chance to be undergo hyperthermia treatment.

"In the last two weeks we've gotten probably half-a-dozen calls asking us about it," said Jo Kenney, executive director of the Santa Cruz AIDS Project. "I know of one person who's been calling all over the country trying to find out how to become part of this treatment."

It's an all-too-common reaction
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Cure stories frustrate victims

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by AIDS patients when one more potential miracle cure surfaces. Santa Cruz physician Arnold Leff, who treats a number of AIDS patients, calls it the allure of the "procedure of the month."

Before hyperthermia there have been "breakthroughs" reported involving vitamin C, the cancer drug Interferon, an herbal remedy called Compound Q, a wild array of experimental drugs and even medicinal mushrooms.

"It's a constant problem," said Leff. "Every new idea that comes out gets (patients) up or down."

"It really boils down to investigators or physicians who have an idea taking a very small number of patients and trying the idea out and then believing there has been a remarkable improvement.

"The problem is that most of

these ideas turn out not to be useful and some of them turn out to be quite dangerous," Leff said.

In the case of hyperthermia, so far the treatment has only been successful on one patient, and scientists warn that success might be nothing more than a fluke, or even a reaction to drugs the patient had been treated with earlier. The physicians involved in the treatments, William Logan and Kenneth Alonso, made it clear from the beginning that the treatment was only in its earliest experimental stages and no conclusions could be reached from the success of one patient.

Questions abound about the procedure — previous tests had shown that the HIV virus could survive temperatures up to 130 degrees, yet hyperthermia only takes the patients blood up to 108 degrees. Why would that kill the virus? And even

if a patient's blood were cleansed by the procedure, the virus may well be in bone marrow or other body tissue.

But the news media reported the successful treatment — and the subsequent treatment of another AIDS patient with Kaposi's — despite the lack of any in-depth study.

And since AIDS is an incurable fatal disease and Kaposi's is one of the most common cancers that results from it, any mention of a new treatment for either disease has an almost immediate impact. By early June, hyperthermia was the lead story in the "AIDS Treatment News" newsletter published in San Francisco. Stories on the treatment had surfaced in major newspapers on both coasts, and Time magazine debated the wisdom of reporting such unproved cures in its "Ethics" section.

Still, Leff and others think hyperthermia or some similar treatment may have value. "Plasmapheresis, where you take the blood out and do something to it, is being studied in a number of places," Leff said.

And as wrenching as it can be to hear of potential cures that haven't been fully tested and aren't available, Santa Cruz Aids Project director Kenny said she is glad the procedure got the attention it did.

"I think it's important for the media to pick up what hopeful cures there are," Kenny said, although she said she wished there had been more qualifications attached to the initial reports.

Kenny also said she thought the exposure was important because treatments such as hyperthermia may not be getting the attention they deserve from scientists. Pharmaceutical companies sponsor

much AIDS research and hyperthermia — even though it costs about \$30,000 a treatment now — would not profit those companies, she said.

"The media attention may have been positive in that some studies come out of it now," said Kenny.

For Tom Graves, though, the hype about hyperthermia has not changed the fact that he has an incurable disease, no more than the hype about Compound Q or Interferon did.

It has offered hope. But it's a hope he approaches with caution.

"(Hyperthermia) is wonderful and I hope it works but I'm not going to get that excited about it," Graves said.

Still, Graves is feeling pretty good these days. If he weren't...

"If I was very far along, which I'm not, I would try anything," Graves said. "What have you got to lose?"