

HEALTH

Supplement may prevent 'baby blues'

Research points the way to dietary treatment for postpartum depression

BY MARK IYPE

A dietary supplement that provides an alternative for a protein that "eats" mood altering brain chemicals may be the key to preventing postpartum depression, according to research conducted at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto.

"We think that there may be dietary ways of preventing postpartum 'baby blues,'" said Dr. Jeffrey Meyer, a psychiatrist and the principal investigator of the study. "We could potentially come up with a strategy that is relatively simple and not unrealistic economically."

Meyer, whose research was published Tuesday in the *Archives of General Psychiatry*, discovered that levels of the brain protein monoamine oxidase A (MAO-A) in healthy women peaked five days after delivery — 43 per cent higher than in women not recently pregnant.

Day 5 is when postpartum blues — the precursor to full-blown clinical postpartum depression — are usually the most severe, said Meyer.

The MAO-A protein removes chemicals such as serotonin and dopamine — which help people maintain a normal mood — from the brain. Higher levels

of the protein mean that the removal process is overly active, making women feel sad.

Of Meyer's 30 test subjects, the two mothers with the highest levels of MAO-A both eventually suffered from postpartum depression.

Meyer said the creation of a natural health supplement enriched with amino acids that can act as an alternative "food source" for the brain chemical that soaks up MOA-A could in effect, prevent the onset of a depressive episode.

Meyer said research has already shown that higher levels of MAO-A have been linked to other forms of clinical depression, but this study links the protein to postpartum issues for the first time.

About 80 per cent of new mothers experience a mild form of "baby blues," but those feelings usually disappear in a few weeks, according to the Canadian Mental Health Association. Postpartum depression affects about 10 to 15 per cent of new mothers. Only a fraction of new mothers descend into postpartum psychosis, which is the most severe form of the illness. Meyer's team is already working with a natural product manufacturer to create a suitable dietary supplement for new mothers.

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The bomber crew of George Smith (left), Robert Sinden, Harry Aley, pilot Carlos Brown, Thomas Watson, Bernard Tutt and David Little. The crew members were killed when their plane was shot down in November 1943 during a return flight to England after a raid on Frankfurt. A team of international experts, including the Canadian military's top forensic scientist, is preparing to probe the unearthed remnants of the rediscovered crash site in central Germany.

HISTORY

Forensic experts probe remains of war dead

Scientists identify remains of fallen Canadian airmen, helping historians fill in blanks

BY RANDY BOSWELL

Days ahead of the 65th anniversary of the Allied victory in Europe during the Second World War, a team of international experts — including the Canadian military's top forensic scientist — is preparing to probe the rediscovered crash site of an allied bomber in which several Canadians died.

The plane went down in November 1943 while returning to England after a bombing raid on Frankfurt. Among the dead were a Royal Canadian Air Force pilot, a Canadian flight officer and five British and Australian crewmen.

The body of Vancouver's Harry Aley was one of three identified and buried at the time.

But bones recently discovered at the long-forgotten site are being tested to determine whether the remains of Carlos Brown — a U.S.-born pilot who served with Canada's air force during the war — will finally receive a proper burial 67 years after the crash.

"He would be honoured as a Canadian veteran," says Laurel Clegg, the Department of National Defence forensic anthropologist who handles the

identification of newly discovered wartime remains of fallen Canadians.

"They have found partial remains," she told Canwest News Service. "It's a very new case and we're still awaiting more information."

The crash site near Brandau, about 40 kilometres southeast of Frankfurt, was located last year by 21-year-old Felix Klingenberg, a student steeped in Second World War history who had set out with a metal detector to find traces of the Royal Air Force Lancaster bomber.

"The mortal remains of at least four crew members are still in the ground," Klingenberg reported on a military history website earlier this year, reassuring readers that German authorities had been alerted to the find and that the scene would be respectfully managed.

Clegg said the Canadian government learned about the successful search two weeks ago and began discussions with German officials about how human remains would be handled.

She said Aley, the bomb aimer on the ill-fated flight, is known to have been "thrown clear" when the plane struck the ground, allowing his body to be recovered and buried at a

military cemetery in Germany.

But "because the nature of this crash was so severe," Clegg says, no remains were ever specifically identified as those of 28-year-old Flight Lt. Brown, a New Yorker who moved to Montreal to join Canada's war effort in August 1941.

That was four months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor prompted the U.S. to enter the war.

"I'm still waiting to see what they've managed to recover, and we'll go from there," said Clegg, expressing hope that DNA tests could identify "multiple individuals" and allow officials to "reverently" carry out full military burials for Brown and the three other airmen still formally classified as "missing."

"These remains are highly important," she said.

Brown's U.S. relatives have been alerted to the rediscovery of the downed plane. And in Britain, the 87-year-old brother of another crewman who died when the plane was shot down — RAF wireless operator Sgt. Bernard Tutt — told the *Daily Mail* newspaper that he felt "peace at last" to learn that human remains had been found at the rediscovered crash site.

"I have been looking for his

final resting place since the war ended," said pensioner John Tutt, "and that is a long time to not know where he died."

Further excavation of the scene and examination of remains from the crash are to be conducted this summer.

Clegg said DND's history directorate is handling more than a dozen cases in which Canadian remains from First World War or Second World War battle sites have been recently recovered and await identification and burial.

She said the identification process typically involves a combination of DNA analysis and the examination of dental records, archival documents and other evidence.

In one of Clegg's most high-profile cases, several years ago she examined the remains of a Canadian soldier from the First World War that had been discovered by workers digging at a construction site in France.

The remains were identified as those of an Alberta serviceman, Pte. Herbert Peterson, who was honoured with a military funeral at a French cemetery in April 2007, some 90 years after his death.

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HEALTH

Sex life suffers with pill, researchers say

Hormonal contraceptives lower libido

BY SHARON KIRKEY

With "the pill" poised to turn 50 this weekend comes research linking hormonal contraceptives with diminished desire and other forms of "female sexual dysfunction."

The study of more than 1,000 German female medical students found those taking birth control pills and other forms of hormonal contraception were at the highest risk for low libido and arousal problems.

The findings don't prove cause and effect, the researchers stressed — just an association.

But birth control pills can lower circulating levels of testosterone, the "male" hormone needed to stimulate sexual desire and regulate blood flow to the genitals, in both sexes.

The study appears in the *Journal of Sexual Medicine*. Editor-in-chief Dr. Irwin Goldstein, a Montreal native and director of sexual medicine at the Alvarado Hospital, University of California, San Diego, said the study shows that, "when you fool around with your sex steroid hormones, you gamble with your sex life."

"The value of this paper is to remind us that 300 million users of the pill [worldwide] are putting themselves at risk [of sexual changes], with extremely limited informed consent that this is happening," Goldstein said.

In all, 1,086 women from six medical schools completed online questionnaires designed to identify problems with sexual function within the past four weeks. The women filled out the "Female Sexual Function Index," a scale consisting of 19 questions measuring desire, arousal problems, lubrication, orgasms, satisfaction and pain.

Almost 90 per cent had used contraception, and almost all had been sexually active in the previous four weeks; 80 per cent were in a stable relationship for at least the past six months.

The three most common means of birth control were oral contraception (about 70

per cent), condoms (23 per cent) and the vaginal ring (seven per cent).

Based on their scores, 32 per cent of the women in the study were considered at risk for female sexual dysfunction.

Women using non-hormonal forms of birth control, such as condoms and intrauterine methods, or no contraception had higher desire and arousal scores than women using birth control pills, vaginal rings and other hormonal birth control.

"Our data show that hormonal contraception in particular was associated with lower desire and arousal scores when compared with other contraceptives," the researchers write.

The group at lowest risk for female sexual dysfunction — meaning those with the highest sexual function score — were using condoms or other non-hormonal methods.

"The effect of hormones is there, we have an association. But, at this time, we cannot say if this is causality," said Dr. Alfred Mueck, professor in the Centre of Women's Health at Germany's University of Tuebingen.

"We can only say there might be an effect of hormonal contraceptives [on sexual functioning]. But this is only one factor beside other factors that can influence sexual function."

Women who reported higher stress had lower desire scores. The problem "is really very multifactorial," Mueck said.

Goldstein said the pill inhibits the production of testosterone in the ovaries, and increase the levels of a protein that binds to testosterone, so that less testosterone is "unbound" and free to act in the body.

On May 9, 1960, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved the sale of oral pills for contraception for the first time.

The pill became available in Canada in 1960, but doctors could only legally prescribe it for "menstrual regulation" and other therapeutic purposes. Contraception was formally legalized in Canada in 1969.

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OPINION

G8 often fails to deliver on aid promises

This year marks deadline of Universal Access Pledge made in 2005 for HIV prevention

BARBARA YAFFE
VANCOUVER SUN

Those fretting about what services the Harper government's G8 maternal health initiative will fund should consider the disappointing track record of delivery on past G8 aid promises.

Julio Montaner, director of B.C.'s Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS, recalled this week that a 2005 commitment made by G8 countries at Gleneagles, Scotland, known as the Universal Access Pledge, promised delivery of HIV prevention, treatment and care to all those needing it by 2010.

"The G8 has failed to deliver on the pledge, despite repeatedly reassuring the international community about their commitment."

While much debate around Prime Minister Stephen Harper's maternal and child health initiative has focused on the Conservative government's refusal to fund abortions as part of the effort, Montaner says there is an even bigger issue at

play — a failure to honour past foreign aid commitments.

"There cannot be a successful Maternal and Child Health Initiative, unless we deliver on the Universal Access Pledge."

The president of the Geneva-based International AIDS Society explains that in many African countries HIV infection affects some 30 per cent of women of reproductive age.

HIV is the leading global killer of women of reproductive age. Fully three-quarters of those aged 15 to 24 in sub-Saharan Africa are living with HIV.

A treatment known as Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy or HAART, says Montaner, has decreased the number of Ugandan orphans by 93 per cent.

He points out that motherless children are 10 times more likely to die within two years of their mother's death.

The HAART treatment of pregnant HIV mothers also dramatically eliminates HIV transmission to their babies.

Yet, "so far the G8 has failed to meet this commitment and in fact it's currently estimated that they are probably no more than 40 per cent [toward] achieving this."

PMO spokesman Andrew Macdougall reports, "Screening

and treatment for sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS will be a part of Canada's [maternal health] package." But Montaner says this is a far cry from the Universal Access Pledge.

Montaner said he has repeatedly written to Harper to determine Canada's current position on the neglected pledge.

"He has failed to state his position or even worse Canada's position regarding this matter," says Montaner.

Montaner has also taken his concerns about what he calls "a substantial epidemic" of HIV/AIDS among Canada's first nations people to Health Minister Leona Aglukak who "has declined to meet with us to discuss this issue."

Montaner says he has invited the PM to speak at a July conference in Vienna that will focus on the fight against HIV/AIDS. Harper declined.

The experience reflected by the Universal Access Pledge illustrates that aid promises made at high profile conferences too often don't materialize.

And, with nations lately battling big budget deficits and onerous debt loads, good intentions become even more difficult to translate into action.

Remember the United Nations adoption in 2000 of the Millennium Declaration, setting targets for reducing poverty, hunger, illiteracy, discrimination against women and environmental degradation by 2015?

As part of that pledge, rich nations were to boost foreign aid budgets to 0.7 per cent of GDP.

Well, according to 2009 statistics from the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, Canada spends 0.3 per cent of its budget on foreign aid while the U.S. antes up a scant 0.2 per cent.

And Canada, as part of its battle against the deficit, announced in March it intends to freeze its foreign aid budget next year.

None of which is to say that wealthy countries don't have the best of intentions when they set out to help by way of enterprises like Harper's maternal health initiative.

It's simply that competing domestic political imperatives often thwart those intentions.

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