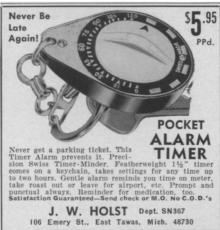
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CHEMOTHERAPY

'Incurable' III Responds

Hodgkin's disease responds to treatment patterned after leukemia therapy.

The first results of a new study show that advanced Hodgkin's disease can be successfully treated and may even be completely cured by chemical means. The finding may spell the end of what has been called an incurable disease. Certainly it will remove some of the pessimism that has surrounded the disease.

Until very recently, even the most advanced physician was inclined to take a grim view of the outcome when faced with a patient with Hodgkin's disease. With a few courageous exceptions this was the situation until three or four years ago when two well-established radiologists, one in England at the Christie Hospital in Manchester and the other at Stanford University in California succeeded in curing early Hodgkin's disease with massive doses of X-rays. Cure was the word they used and among conservative physicians unused to such outspoken language it raised many an eyebrow.

However, important as this advance was, it served only to emphasize the need for early diagnosis in Hodgkin's disease. This is not easy because people are not usually aware anything is wrong until quite late in the course of the disease. Furthermore diagnosis is not a simple affair; it usually needs an X-ray of the lymphatic vessels.

Consequently almost two-thirds of the patients in whom the diagnosis of Hodgkin's disease is confirmed are faradvanced cases. This means that they are not so easily treated with any real hope of cure.

But now, taking a cue from the multiple drug treatment devised for infants with acute leukemia, Dr. Paul Carbone of the National Cancer Institute, Bethesda, Md., in association with Dr. Arthur Serpick of Baltimore Public Health Service Hospital and Dr. Vincent DeVita of NCI, has given four different anti-cancer drugs to Hodgkin's disease patents. With them, the doctors have succeeded in stopping the disease and returning the patients to normal in 24 cases out of 30.

The drugs Dr. Carbone has used in this latest study are vincristine, nitrogen mustard, methylhydrazine and prednisone. In general the treatment has been tolerated well by the patients, he said, although of course there are toxic reactions with these agents which have to be guarded against.

Since the study is still going on and others like it are being done in other parts of the country, the final word is by no means spoken. However, more than half the patients have remained well for nine months without the need for additional drugs. One patient has been well for over two years without the need for further treatment.

"Unquestionably," Dr. Carbone told a clinical conference at the National Institutes of Health, "treatment with only one drug can destroy large numbers of diseased cells. But combinations of drugs destroy more. Thus the survival of patients should attest to the improvement that can be obtained by this type of chemotherapy.

"Not only should survival be prolonged but it may be possible to show in the not-too-distant future that the complete eradication of tumor cells can be achieved in some patients." Most researchers in this field regard five-year survival as the critical measure.

But as another speaker at the conference put it: "There is now room for a more optimistic outlook."

Recent studies at the National Cancer Institute have indicated the usefulness of several other drugs including methotrexate, ibenzmethyzin and BCNU. Previously other investigators had shown two antibiotics, streponigrin and actinomycin D, to be effective.

Hodgkin's disease is not a very common condition, but it does kill nearly 4,000 Americans a year, according to Dr. Seymour Perry of NCI. The disease attacks the body's lymphatic system and the first signs of it are usually enlarged glands in the neck, under the armpits or the groin.

Its cause is a mystery. Various theories have been put forward but none has been confirmed. However, most doctors tend to regard it as a form of cancer. Certainly the gross swellings of the neck and groin and spread of the disease to organs such as the liver and lungs make the later course of the disease very cancer-like.

The disease strikes most often at individuals in their twenties and thirties and is twice as common among men as in women.