



Unproven therapies and media hype

Some claims for therapeutic miracles in medicine just don't pass the straight-face test, and surgical cure of fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue syndrome falls into that category. Nonetheless, in this issue (page 277) Wilke¹ addresses with undeserved respect the proposal by Rosner and Hafez that a potentially dangerous neurosurgical procedure is a reasonable approach to these cryptogenic conditions.

He points out that no one — Rosner, Hafez, or any other investigator — has published any evidence for their claims, but that there still may be a small number of patients who might benefit. Wilke is too polite. The claims are rubbish and, I would venture to add, unethical.

Why, you might ask, is it unethical to publicize on national television a procedure that might have something to offer for millions of sufferers with currently untreatable conditions? The answer to the question lies in the word “might” and in the nature of the conditions we are talking about. Might implies uncertainty, and there is no excuse for promoting an unstudied, therefore unproven, and certainly risky treatment in this age of scientific enlightenment.

In life-threatening conditions like AIDS or malignancy, some level of uncertainty may be tolerable, but fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue syndrome clearly do not fall into this category. In fact, Rosner and Hafez are proposing a treatment that is infinitely more dangerous than the conditions they presume to treat. And think of the money to be made if everyone with fibromyalgia needs neurosurgery. It could spell the end of the recession, at least for neurosurgeons.

In this era of unbridled consumerism, when patients are more likely to believe some unreviewed statement they read on the Web or see on television than to trust the opinions of their physicians, it is incumbent upon all of us who practice medicine to be sure that what we do has face validity and is backed by good science. Neurosurgery for fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue syndrome has neither, and we should shun it.

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■ REFERENCES

1. Wilke WS. Can fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue be cured by surgery? *Cleve Clin J Med* 2001; 68: 277–279.