NATIONAL news

SKIN DEEP

Help nears for AIDS facial wasting

by Bob Roehr

Combination therapy had controlled Bradley Land's HIV, but it also drained the fat from his face, marking it with the gaunt canyons that belied his clinical good health. The social and psychological effects were devastating. "I was looking forward to suicide," the Los Angeles resident said.

Then in 2003, six treatments with an experimental injection ameliorated the worst of his facial wasting and people again began to look at him "as a normal person" rather than as a skeletal specter of death. Land is "proud and thankful for my return to the human race."

His story was just one of several moving testimonials that a Food and Drug Administration advisory committee heard at a meeting March 25 outside Washington, D.C. The panel was considering expedited approval of what is now called Sculptra for reconstructive purposes of lipoatrophy associated with HIV infection and treatment.

"Facial lipoatrophy has become the scarlet letter of AIDS," said veteran San Francisco AIDS doc Marcus Conant. "It is the thing that is bothering our patients the most...even doctors wait to start their medication." Nearly half of all patients experience a degree of facial lipoatrophy within three years of beginning therapy.

Some patients have stopped therapy because they believe it causes the wasting. But Conant said it is unclear whether the syndrome is because of the disease itself and only becomes obvious over time, because of the drugs used in treating HIV or because of a combination of factors. His experience using Sculptra in a research protocol during the past four months has led him to believe, "It is safe and effective, and my patients would benefit tremendously" from its availability.

Sculptra is an injectable poly-L-lactic acid that has been available outside the United States since 1999 under the trade name New-Fill. It has been used on more than 150,000 patients in 33 countries for cosmetic purposes such as filling wrinkles.

Facial wasting associated with HIV is a much more severe problem, and significantly more of the product has to be injected to achieve satisfactory results. The company that developed it was small and did not have the resources to put into those clinical trials. As a result, most of the trials have been investigator initiated, each slightly different, with a small number of patients. That has made it difficult to evaluate and compare results.

A study of 50 patients in Paris used ultrasound to show a significant increase in total skin thickness in the area treated with New-Fill. Photos also documented real improvement. But perhaps most important was the great satisfaction that most patients had with the procedure.

PHOTO BY BOB ROEHR

Drs. Douglas Mest, Marcus Conant and Peter Engelhard testified at a Food and Drug Administration advisory committee meeting March 25 outside Washington, D.C.