

Few Sickle Cell Patients Receive Beneficial Drug

Study finds medication helps reduce painful episodes

Special to the NNPA from *Our Weekly*

Few American adults with sickle cell anemia are getting a recommended medication that can help them manage pain, breathing problems and other debilitating symptoms, according to a new study.

Using a national database, researchers found that less than one-quarter of sickle cell patients who should have been taking a drug called hydroxyurea actually were.

"This is a medication that's highly beneficial and yet most people aren't getting it," said Dr. George Buchanan, a sickle cell expert, and a professor at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas, who was not involved in the new study.

Findings from the study were reported in the April 28 issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

Sickle cell anemia is an inherited disease that mainly affects people of African, South American or Mediterranean descent. In the United States, about one in 500 African American children are born with the condition, according to the U.S. National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI).

Experts contend that the central problem in sickle cell is that the body produces red blood cells that are crescent-shaped, rather than disc-shaped. Those abnormal cells tend to be sticky and can block blood flow—causing symptoms such as fatigue and shortness of breath.

Many people with sickle cell

also suffer sudden bouts of pain due to poor blood flow. And according to treatment guidelines released last year, adults who have three or more pain "crises" within a year should be prescribed hydroxyurea.

Hydroxyurea was originally developed as a cancer drug, but it treats sickle cell by prompting the body to make fetal hemoglobin — an oxygen-carrying protein in red blood cells. That, in turn, helps keep red blood cells from becoming stiff, sticky and crescent-shaped, according to the NHLBI.

"My own view is, the vast majority of people with sickle cell anemia should be taking hydroxyurea," said Buchanan, who helped develop the latest treatment

need it getting the drug? There are several issues, said Dr. Michael DeBaun, who directs the sickle cell treatment center at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn.

For one, DeBaun explained, there are few hematologists who specialize in treating sickle cell

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guidelines.

He added that people who work in the field have long known that hydroxyurea is underused, but this study offers hard numbers.

"The findings are not surprising, but they're very disappointing," Buchanan said.

So why aren't more people who

patients—especially adults. So people with the disease often see only a primary care doctor.

But because sickle cell is relatively rare, DeBaun said, most primary care doctors have little experience treating it.

Add to that the fact that they may know little about hydroxyurea.

"It's a cancer drug," DeBaun said, "and most

internists do not go through their training learning how to manage a chemotherapy agent."

Another issue, DeBaun said, is that many sickle cell patients are low-income Blacks. Some may be uninsured or "under-insured," and

possibly have no consistent health provider. Plus, they often live in areas, whether rural or urban, that lack specialists in the disease, DeBaun explained.

Reed Commencement Speaker



PHOTO COURTESY REED COLLEGE

Reed College announces that Kathleen Saadat '74 will be the keynote speaker at the college's 101st annual commencement ceremony on Monday, May 18 — chosen by the graduating class.

Saadat is well known in Portland as an advocate for economic justice, women's rights, equal rights for people of color. She has also served as a mentor for Oregon's LGBTQ community for nearly 40 years. In 1976, Saadat and six others organized one of Portland's first gay rights marches.

Later, she worked with Keeston Lowry and other city employees to craft Portland's civil rights ordinance, which prohibits discrimination against gays and lesbians, and people based on their source of income.

The Reed commencement ceremony begins at 11 a.m. on Reed's Great Lawn in front of Eliot Hall. The ceremony is free and open to the public. More information is at www.reed.edu/commencement.





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