

AZT study implicates immune system disorder

A brief trial of the drug AZT on one autistic child offers exciting new evidence linking some cases of autism to an immune system problem, according to researcher E. Gene Stubbs.

Stubbs stresses that the study was not designed to suggest that AZT is an appropriate treatment for autism. He notes that AZT (zidovudine), the drug most commonly used to treat AIDS, "is not a drug to be prescribed casually—it can cause depression of red and white blood cells and requires close monitoring with frequent blood counts."

Rather, Stubbs says, AZT was chosen because it lowers levels of interferon alpha, a protein involved in fighting infection. Re-

search by Stubbs et al. (in press) indicates that interferon alpha levels are abnormally elevated in some autistic individuals. (Editor's note: *ARRI* will have more on this in upcoming issues.) Stubbs also cites research from the 1980s indicating that children with cancer who receive large doses of interferon alpha as treatment develop autistic symptoms including withdrawal and reduced communication.

"The use of AZT is not important in and of itself," Stubbs says; "what I believe is important is what it tells us. I believe what it may tell us is that, by manipulating interferon alpha levels, one can affect symptoms of autism." He notes that there are other

ways, besides AZT therapy, of altering interferon alpha.

Stubbs conducted his study on a young autistic boy who had responded favorably to several other treatments for immune dysfunction. During AZT treatment the child showed significant improvement in communication, cognitive skills, social relating, and academic and motor skills.

Autistic symptoms improve in pediatric HIV patients using AZT

In intriguing research from a different perspective, Pamela Wolters and colleagues report that children with HIV-caused encephalopathy (brain inflammation) frequently develop symptoms of autism, including vacant staring, emotional "flatness," lethargy, lack of social interest, agitation, and poor attention. Brouwers et al. say such children "seem to exhibit an underlying inability to engage in purposeful, 'expressive' social, emotional, and motivational behavior."

AZT treatment, the researchers say, often reduces the children's autistic behaviors and increases their IQ scores.

E. Gene Stubbs, presentation to the annual meeting of the Autism Society of America, July 1994; also, same author, "Letters," *The Advocate*, Sept.-Oct. 1994.

—and—

"Adaptive behavior of children with symptomatic HIV infection before and after zidovudine therapy," Pamela Wolters, Pim Brouwers, Howard Moss, and Philip Pizzo; *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 1994. Address: Pamela Wolters, Pediatric Branch, NCI, Bldg. 10, Rm. 13N240, Bethesda, MD 20892.

Inclusion: right for everyone?

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they are *demoting* the quality of provision which may enhance those children's lives."

"Caught in the crossfire: the future of special schools," Nils Chapman, *British Journal of Special Education*, Vol. 21, No. 2, June 1994. Address not listed.

—and—

"Who's dreaming?—A general education perspective on inclusion," Diane Rankin, Ann Hallick, Susan Ban, Pam Hartley, Christine Bost, and Nancy Uggla; *Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps*, Vol. 19, No. 3, 1994. Address: Diane Rankin, Gwinnett County Public Schools, Oakland Center, 950 McElvaney Lane, Lawrenceville, GA 30244.

—and—

"Mainstreaming's 'Jimmy' problem," John Leo, *U.S. News & World Report*, June 27, 1994.

—and—

"As Loudoun goes, so may other schools; case could influence future of 'inclusion' of disabled students," Debbi Wilgoren, and Peter Pae, *Washington Post*, August 28, 1994.

—and—

"Push to mainstream disabled students gets a mixed report card," Mary Jordan, *Washington Post*, December 25, 1993.

—and—

"Special pupils, regular classes, thorny issues," Catherine S. Manegold, *New York Times*, January 26, 1994.

—and—

"Swept away by the mainstream," Marcia Reback, *Washington Post*, September 6, 1994.

Facilitated Communication update

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) has issued its long-awaited Position Statement on Facilitated Communication (F/C). Since ASHA is the major organization for the many thousands of speech and language therapists whose primary focus is on the methods and technology for enhancing communication in the communicatively handicapped, the ASHA position statement has been awaited with great interest.

The ASHA statement, adopted at their November 1994 conference in New Orleans, states there to be "...no conclusive evidence that facilitated messages can be reliably attributed to people with disabilities. Rather, most messages originate with the facilitator. Moreover, Facilitated Communication may have negative consequences if it precludes the use of effective and appropriate treatment, supplants other forms of communication, and/or leads to false or unsubstantiated allegations of abuse or mistreatment.

"It is the position of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) that the scientific validity and reliability of Facilitated Communication have not been demonstrated to date....Speech-language pathologists should inform prospective clients and their families or guardians that currently the scientific validity and reliability of Facilitated Communication have not been established, and should obtain their informed consent before using the technique."

The ASHA is the fifth major national professional organization to adopt a position opposing the acceptance of F/C as a valid mode of enhancing expression in the handicapped. In issuing its formal statement disavowing belief in F/C, ASHA joins:

- The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry;
 - The American Academy of Pediatrics;
 - The American Association on Mental Retardation; and,
 - The American Psychological Association.
- ARRI is not aware of any comparable organizations endorsing F/C.

We have continued to monitor the litera-

ture for controlled studies on the validity of F/C. Our last published table of controlled studies (ARRI 7/4) brought the total to 43, covering 334 subjects. If space permits, we plan to publish an updated table including studies 43 to 50, and involving over 400 subjects, in the next issue of *ARRI*.

In none of the 50 studies we have seen thus far—including such studies as those by Singer and Calculator, Berger, and Cardinal, which have been cited favorably by F/C proponent Douglas Biklen—has a single subject been able to confirm Biklen's claim that many (he says the vast majority) of autistic persons can communicate their own thoughts in sentences. Some of Berger's subjects could, with hands-on facilitation, label simple objects (pencil, glove), part of the time. Some of Cardinal's subjects could copy single words part of the time. Thus what has been shown thus far, in a few subjects in a very few studies, is, at best, facilitated object naming, or facilitated word-copying, not facilitated communication.

On December 27, PBS will re-broadcast its *Frontline* segment on F/C, "Prisoners of Silence." The re-broadcast will include an epilogue covering recent research and recent court cases. When "Prisoners of Silence" was first broadcast, in October of 1993, the Facilitated Communication Institute at Syracuse University asked its supporters to write letters of protest to PBS. Since the conclusions of the PBS broadcast were subsequently strongly supported by the *60 Minutes* and *20/20* shows, a similar protest letter campaign is not expected this time.

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