

Health

Advances being made in Parkinson's research

By KATE GILDERDALE
Correspondent

Mark Guttman is a dedicated neurologist who is strongly committed to the treatment and research of Parkinson's disease.

"It's one of the areas (of neurology) where you can really help people quite a bit," noted Guttman, whose practice is located at Markham Stouffville Hospital.

Parkinson's is a chronic brain disease which is characterized by tremor, slow movement and muscle stiffness and is most commonly found in men and women over 55.

Research in the late 1950s and early 1960s revealed that the disease was linked to the loss of a chemical called dopamine, which is produced in certain brain cells.

"The area of the brain affected is the substantia nigra," said Guttman. "A signal is sent from there to other areas which provides feedback for smooth movement control.

"When the cells die, the dopamine, which is used as a transmitter, is lost. The condition is progressive. A patient might start with very mild symptoms that might not require therapy." The discovery that the disease was linked to the

loss of cells as opposed to structural abnormalities was an amazing breakthrough, he said. "At the time this research was being done most of the things that were going on in the brain were structural. This has opened up huge areas of research and therapy for Parkinson's patients."

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Although there is a variety of drugs available, treatment varies widely from patient to patient and even in individuals at different stages of the disease. "We have a whole bunch of different therapies available aimed at reducing the symptoms," said

Guttman. "The dopamine reduction can be replaced by a number of strategies; most medication is used to try and make more or to reduce the loss." Side effects do occur, especially in the later stages of the disease and it's a fine line between not enough medication and too much, he said.

"There's no evidence that (Parkinson's) shortens life spans or kills people, but it can have a major effect on the quality of life." Before a diagnosis is made, other possible causes have to be eliminated, because there is no specific blood test or X-ray which can signal the presence of the disease.

Slowness of movement and stiffness of the muscles become more pronounced as the disease progresses, said Guttman. "People's facial expressions are reduced, muscles don't move very fast, they have difficulty doing up buttons, writing becomes smaller and walking is reduced to shuffling, small steps."

Although the majority of Parkinson's patients are 55 and over, "I have individuals in their 20s in my practice," he noted. "And I see a lot of people from all over, not just York Region."

Guttman is currently involved in six clinical trials for Parkinson's and his office is on the leading edge of research in Canada. "I

have two research nurses working with me - it's a team effort," he noted.

"One of the things we are involved with is new diagnostic testing."

Brain scans have been developed which can read the level of dopamine in the system, indicating whether the disease is present and how far it has progressed. The prohibitive costs involved in performing a scan, however, mean the test is not generally available.

In addition to his involvement with many different types of

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research, Guttman sits on the executive of The Parkinson Foundation of Canada's Toronto Chapter.

"One of the things that we're doing May 13 at the Inn on the Park is a

spring conference for patients and families.


"Last year's conference, the first of its kind, attracted more than 400 people."

April is Parkinson's Awareness Month and on Thursday, April 27, anyone interested in learning more about the disease and the support services available is invited to attend an open house at the beautiful Heintzman House in Thornhill.

An afternoon program, from 1 to 6 p.m., will include demonstrations of tai chi, yoga and physiotherapy exercises, as well as displays from organizations such as York Region Home Care, Union Villa and Mobility bus services. At 7:30 p.m. master of ceremonies Jeremy Brown of CFRB will introduce the evening's entertainment which will include vocalist Donna Waterworth, the big band sounds of Not Affiliated and the Uxbridge Youth Choir, who performed in Toronto's sellout production of Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.

There will also be a 'Spell for Fun! Beat Parkinson's' contest, featuring teams of celebrities. Admission to the open house is free. For more information on this event, or to find out more about services and volunteer opportunities, call the local Parkinson's support group at 294-5069.


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2. Rob Roy	★★★★	R	Adventure	Much	Some	Much
3. A Goshy Movie	★★★	G	Animation	Mild	None	None
4. Jury Duty (new)	★	PG-13	Comedy	Some	Some	Some
5. Tommy Boy	★★	PG-13	Comedy	Mild	Much	Some
6. Don Juan Demarco	★★★	PG-13	Drama	Mild	Mild	Much
7. Outbreak	★★★	R	Thriller	Much	Lots	None
8. Circle of Friends	★★★	PG-13	Drama	Mild	Some	Some
9. Dances With Wolves	★★★	R	Drama	Much	Lots	Some
10. Major Payne	★★	PG-13	Comedy	Some	Some	Mild

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