



Australian Prescriber



AN INDEPENDENT REVIEW

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Early use of new drugs could alter the natural history of multiple sclerosis

Recently introduced drugs (immune-modulating drugs - interferon beta or glatiramer acetate) may help some people in the early stages of multiple sclerosis, according to an article in the latest edition of *Australian Prescriber*, an independent review published by the National Prescribing Service (NPS).

"While the benefits of these new drugs are modest, they do offer for the first time, the hope of altering the course of the relapsing-remitting form of the disease. Unfortunately these drugs cannot help in the secondary phase of multiple sclerosis," said Professor Richard Macdonnell, Department of Neurology, Austin and Repatriation Medical Centre, and Department of Medicine, University of Melbourne, co-author of the article.

MS is a disease of the central nervous system and is the commonest cause of neurological disability in young adults. Many patients have occasional attacks then recover, but some patients become disabled very quickly. The cause of MS is unknown, but medicines which act on the body's immune system can sometimes help reduce the number of attacks.

"The best management of multiple sclerosis is with education and counselling as well as medications. The new immune-modulating drugs offer a number of benefits including reducing the relapse rates by about 30% and slowing the progression of disability by about 12-18 months," Professor Macdonnell said.

However, it is not yet known what impact these drugs will have in the long term on the ultimate degree of disability. Most patients will have some side effects, particularly when starting treatments.

The drugs are expensive injections, but the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) subsidises them for the treatment of patients with relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis.

"These new drugs do offer hope for those people suffering from multiple sclerosis, however they only help during the first stage of the disease. Although the use of drugs for multiple sclerosis is only part of the overall management, many patients also find benefit from lifestyle changes such as exercise and diet; support networks also play an important role," said Dr Elizabeth McDonald, Medical Director, MS Victoria.

State MS Societies provide support services for those with the disease including immunotherapy support programs. These programs provide information regarding the newer drugs, teach self-injection techniques and offer ongoing support and advice in the management of any side effects.

For the complete article or further information visit the *Australian Prescriber* website at <http://www.australianprescriber.com/>

Australian Prescriber is an independent review providing critical commentary on therapeutic topics for health professionals. It is published every two months and includes NPS News, the official newsletter of the NPS, which this month focuses on the topic of antibiotics.

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