

Heart study identifies unnecessary surgery

Too many patients with plaque build-up in their carotid arteries – those that supply blood to the brain – are undergoing unnecessary operations, says Dr. David Spence, a team leader at the Stroke Prevention and Atherosclerosis Research Centre, Robarts Research Institute in London, Ont.

Spence is the lead investigator of a study, conducted with 468 patients at the centre between 2000 and 2008 and due to be published this month in the JAMA journal Archives of Neurology, that showed that intensive medical therapy including aggressive control of blood pressure and cholesterol levels is more effective as a first-line treatment for most patients with this condition, known as asymptomatic carotid stenosis.

“It’s a crazy thing,” Spence told Forever Young. “Cardiologists are putting stents in the carotid arteries of people who don’t need them.” This, he adds, creates surgical risks that are often greater than the risk posed by the atherosclerosis.

Surgery involves either inserting a stent into the artery or performing a carotid endarterectomy, a procedure that removes the plaque from the artery.

Spence says that in the U.S., 70 per cent of patients with this plaque build-up, which narrows the arteries and impedes blood flow, who have no symptoms are having these operations. In Canada the figure is lower at about 30 per cent. But of those patients only about five per cent actually need the surgery, he says.

Those are people who have microemboli – microscopic blood clots – in the brain arteries, identified using a procedure called a transcranial Doppler that Spence describes as a helmet-like device that allows the doctors to listen to the arteries in the brain. “You can hear little thunks that indicate chunks breaking off.”

These patients have a greater risk of the emboli causing a stroke and thus benefit from a surgical procedure. But, he says, the 90 or so per cent of patients with no symptoms and no microemboli have only a one per cent risk of a stroke, far less than the risk from surgery.

Spence's study showed that patients who received the intensive medical therapy – involving medications to control blood pressure and cholesterol as well as lifestyle changes such as quitting smoking, exercise and a healthy diet (Spence recommends a Mediterranean diet, low in animal fats and high in fruits, vegetables, whole grains and oils such as olive and canola) – had reduced the risk of microemboli and of cardiovascular events like heart attack or stroke.

Canadian heart at the Oscars

Affairs of the heart are often fodder for Oscar contenders but there's a different kind of heart film being unveiled at this year's Academy Awards.

The Globe and Mail reports that the two-minute short film designed to inspire women to take better care of their hearts is being produced by Sarah Polley, who has emerged in recent years as one of Canada's up and coming actors/ writers.

Commissioned by Becel Margarine and executive-produced by CTV and Bravo!FACT (Foundation to Assist Canadian Talent), it follows a woman through phases of her life and explores the chambers of her heart. Starring are Sarah Manninen (*The Line*) and Jean-Michel Le Gal (*Shanti Baba Ram and the Dancers of Hope*).

The film will premiere March 7, during the awards.

Polley is no stranger to the Oscar ceremonies, nominated for her adapted screenplay of the 2006 feature film *Away From Her*, which also garnered a best actress nomination for star Julie Christie. Filming the new short in Toronto, Polley is joined by her *Away From Her* production team.

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