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# A&M health center pays patients to participate in study of flu virus

By Tom Cawthra  
Reporter

Flu season is in full swing at Texas A&M, and the A.P. Beutel Health Center is paying qualified patients \$185 to participate in a study conducted by A&M and the Baylor College of Medicine.

Dr. John Quarles, A&M virologist, said although flu viruses have been treated since the 1940s with antibiotics and penicillin, this study, designed to determine the effects of an aerosolized form of rimantadine, a drug used in the treatment of acute influenza, is unique.

"The thing this study is doing that's a little bit different (from other flu studies at the health center) is that we administer the drug to the patient as a small particle aerosol through a small mask placed over the patients' faces," he said.

Quarles said an aerosol form of the drug is used so the drug quickly sets in where the virus starts.

"You breathe in flu viruses and they begin replicating in the mucus membranes in your nose and throat," he said.

"If you take a drug as a pill," Quarles explained, "there is some amount of time that it takes before the drug dissolves in your stomach and is taken into your bloodstream and to other parts of your body. So the idea behind an aerosol application is that it gets the drug to the virus immediately."

He said another advantage of the aerosol form of rimantadine is that a much lower concentration of the drug is used by avoiding the bloodstream.

Participants in the study are selected from health center patients who have contacted the flu within the 24-hour period prior to their visit to the center.

Quarles said seven patients have been admitted to the program this semester, six of whom are members of the Corps of Cadets. He said he hopes that will increase to about 40 by spring break, when traditionally the number of flu cases reported to the health center drops dramatically for the semester.

Patient eligibility includes a mandatory three full-day minimum under health center observation. If patients are admitted and miss classes as a result, Quarles said they are officially excused from those classes by the University.

"In the long run, the students would be better off staying away from class, anyway," Quarles said. "If people think they have the flu, they should get out of public circulation."

Brian Weir, a sophomore secondary education major and member of the Aggie Band, said he checked into the center Monday with a temperature near 103 degrees.

He said he volunteered to participate in the program because his physical condition made it impossible to participate in the Corps' daily activities.

"I would have stayed in bed anyway," Weir said. "Why not have someone who knows what they're doing take care of me?"

"My fever's down to normal. I'm feeling 100 percent better."

Another patient, Ronnie Kirby, a sophomore general studies major and Corps member living next door to Weir, realized he had the viral infection when he reported for early morning inspection.

"We (the Corps members) got up



Photo by Shelly Smith

Ronnie Kirby, left, and Paul Normenn breathe a specially medicated mist through a mask.

one morning and went out into the hall for inspection," he said. "We (Kirby and Weir) kept sweating. We couldn't stand up we were so weak."

Dr. Robert Atmar, Class of '78, monitors the patients at the center.

He said potential patients are screened at the center for all or some of the following flu symptoms con-

treatment which involves meals and necessary breaks," said Atmar.

On the second day the patients are put on a routine schedule, he explained. They breathe the aerosol through an oxygen-type face mask for three 4-hour periods in the morning, afternoon and evening. The tests are scheduled during the

Eligible patients must sign a consent form prior to admission to the study. They are aware that the rimantadine aerosol may cause nasal irritation or mild wheezing, and it is possible that other more serious side effects of the treatment may occur.

According to Atmar, a lot of research on the aerosol form of the drug was pioneered at A&M through the Baylor College of Medicine.

"The two groups have worked together in the past with a different drug called ribovine and have shown that it was effective when delivered by aerosol," he said.

A&M and Baylor researchers and personnel worked together using a technique pioneered at A&M in influenza studies at A&M, he said.

He said A&M researchers were the first to study the aerosolized rimantadine in the treatment of patients who have acquired acute influenza without being injected with any form of the virus.

In the present experiment, Atmar and medicine levels are detected in the patients' blood, he said.

David Curington, a sophomore Corps member majoring in psychology, said the hospital staff has been taking blood samples from him since his 11 p.m. arrival Tuesday. "They take blood about every two hours," he said. "When I got up about eleven, they took four vials, one, they woke me up and took a vial. At three o'clock, they took a vial, and then at seven, at morning two."

*"The thing this study is doing that's a little bit different (from other flu studies at the health center) is that we administer the drug to the patient as a small particle aerosol through a small mask placed over the patients' faces."*

— Dr. John Quarles, A&M virologist

tacted within 24 hours prior to the screening:

- muscle aches
- runny nose
- sore throat
- dry cough
- headache
- photophobia (eye irritation from bright light)
- 101 degree temperature or higher
- weakness
- loss of appetite

He said if those who are entitled to health center treatment feel they have these symptoms and want to participate in the study, they should see a physician at the center as quickly as possible.

"Once the patients are enrolled in the study, it's basically three days in the health center because the aerosol treatment requires a twelve-hour

second and third days of hospitalization.

Atmar said the patients do not have to wear the mask at night.

"The mask is fairly comfortable," he said. "But it does restrict your movement to the bed, and you can't sleep on your stomach."

Atmar said rimantadine is manufactured in pill form, but it has not been approved for use in the United States.

He explained that the aerosol experiment eliminates side effects of the drug's oral form such as dizziness, lack of concentration, insomnia and nervousness caused by extended consumption.

"This happens to those people who have taken it to prevent getting the flu as opposed to treatment for the flu," he said. "All those symptoms went away when the medication was discontinued."

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