

Doctors fight brain defect

BETHESDA, Md. (AP) — About two dozen children cluster around Dr. Max Muenke. Most sit in wheelchairs, their muscles either too rigid to move or too floppy to hold them up. Many cannot speak. Some faces bear signs of their illness: a misshapen head, cleft palate, eyes pushed together. In the worst cases, babies may have one centered eye.

These children have a baffling brain defect called holoprosencephaly, and their parents brought them to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in desperate hope that Muenke can help unlock the mystery.

Sometime during the first few weeks of fetal development, something went terribly wrong and stopped these children's brains from dividing into normal right and left sides. Now, scientists at the NIH and five new brain centers around the country have begun the first real effort to attack this defect and improve these children's lives.

The reason: A wealthy Dallas family, frustrated at doctors' inability to help their 4-year-old son, has raised almost \$10 million bankrolling new "Carter Centers for Brain Research" to study HPE and provide expert care.

Muenke's quest is to test these children's genes, hunting which ones went wrong. The first question a parent asks: Will the gene testing provide a cure?

"We need to learn first how come your child has holoprosencephaly," Muenke replies gently. "I feel I would be lying to you if I said I expect a cure in the next years."

Yet while he warns against false hope, Muenke is cautiously excited. Already, drugs are helping some children move better. Cutting-edge brain tests are revealing cognitive function. Tools to help children

learn and communicate are under development. Suspect genes are under study.

"We're pushing the envelope," said Dr. Stephen Kinsman of the HPE center at Baltimore's Kennedy Krieger Institute. "We're saying, 'How is the brain working in this child and what are the next brain processes we need to help in this child's development that will give them more function?'"

And the influence of the new Carter centers sparked the NIH to bring together about 70 neuroscientists to share the latest research with parents.

"I want to ask how much more can I do for her. I want to know if there is something more," said Irene Leal, who brought 4-year-old Jessica from Texas to be examined at NIH.

Jessica can't walk or talk, but she has proved wrong doctors who predicted she'd have no mental function: With a huge grin, she promptly responds when her mom, in English or Spanish, asks her to blow a kiss.

HPE affects an estimated one in 10,000 live births and is believed responsible for thousands more miscarriages.

Severe HPE can kill quickly, while some mildly affected children may live largely normal lives. Moderate HPE, in turn, causes varying disabilities: problems moving, seizures, inability to speak or eat solid foods, and facial defects.

Specialists can help, yet parent after parent tells of doctors who dismissed them.

"There is a huge amount of ignorance out there in the physician community," said Dr. Hal Urschel III, who knew little about HPE until his son Chance was born with it.

Frustrated by the hunt for care, his family's Don and Linda Carter Foundation recruited specialists and established HPE centers at Krieger, Texas Scottish Rite Hospital for Children in Dallas, Stanford University, Rutgers University, and the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

The centers provide HPE exams, enroll patients in treatment studies, and guide families to medical information and resources for equipment like wheelchairs. Many services are free to families; check <http://www.stanford.edu/group/hpe> for information.

What these scientists learn about HPE could open new insight into numerous other brain disorders, such as cerebral palsy.

Nobody knows what causes HPE. Mothers with diabetes or abnormally low cholesterol levels seem at higher risk of having an HPE baby. Occasionally it is inherited. Various drugs or chemicals are suspects.

Doctors can't rebuild a malformed brain. Still, "we've seen a lot of progress," said Nancy Clegg of Texas Scottish Rite, describing drugs that ease some movement problems.

Now cutting-edge brain tests promise to determine why one child fares so much worse than another, and what cognitive function patients who can't move or speak actually have.

How? Rutgers scientists measure IQ by tracking a child's eye gaze. Another test measures fleeting electrical impulses to pinpoint which brain regions function best. Figure that out and scientists might one day push those regions to work better, said neuroscientist April Benasich.

Science Briefs

Cancer treatment may be dangerous

WASHINGTON (AP) — A compound that seemed like a promising new weapon in the battle against cancer may face a clouded future following the discovery that it kills human liver cells.

The agent, called TRAIL, has been under investigation for use against many types of cancer because it causes cancerous cells to die. It had proven safe in mice and non-human primates and human tests were on the near horizon.

A team of researchers led by Stephen C. Strom of the University of Pittsburgh discovered that

human liver cells exposed to the compound in lab tests were killed. Their findings are being published in the May issue of the journal Nature Medicine.

The drug firms Immunex and Genentech have been working together on the development of TRAIL. Officials there said they were forging ahead with the development while also working with Strom, who has advised them of his findings.

"We are certainly not dismissing Dr. Strom's findings. In fact, quite to the contrary, we are working closely with him," said Doug Williams, chief technology officer at Immunex.

Williams said there are questions about whether the molecule

used in Strom's tests is exactly the same as the type developed by Immunex and Genentech and also whether its effect in a working liver would be the same as in liver cells in a lab test.

Anger may lead to more attacks

DALLAS (AP) — People who are highly anger-prone are nearly three times more likely to have a heart attack, a study found.

The connection between anger and heart attacks held true even after researchers took into account other major risk factors such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, smoking and obesity.

"The implications of our study are that anger could potentially lead to heart attacks, especially among middle-aged men and women with normal blood pressure," said Janice Williams, an epidemiologist in Atlanta who led the study while at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The study adds to previous research showing a link between heart health and depression, hostility and other emotions.

Previous studies have shown that stress hormones constrict blood vessels and may trigger a blockage in the arteries.

The latest findings appear in Monday's issue of Circulation, a journal of the American Heart Association.

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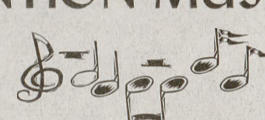
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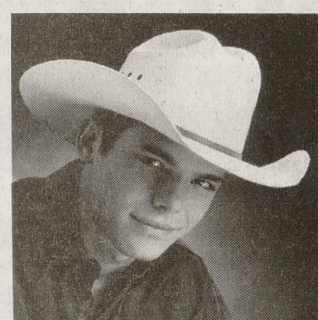
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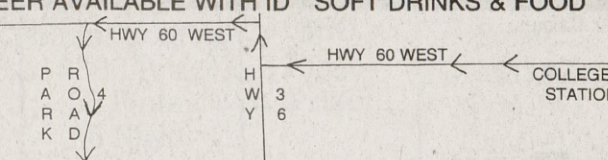
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