

Doctors can see through heart wall

(AP)—A new diagnostic technique can give doctors a look into the heart wall and tell them more accurately which heart attack patients will benefit from bypass surgery or angioplasty, a study found.

The technique, known as contrast-enhanced magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), can see through the entire thickness of the heart wall — typically four-tenths of an inch — and tell doctors which tissue can be saved and which is dead. The common scanning techniques now in use read only the surface.

The new technique "is so sensitive that we can pick out heart attacks in people who did not even know they had one," said Dr. Raymond Kim, who led the study.

The researchers at Northwestern University and Siemens Medical Systems, both in Chicago, studied 50 patients with coronary

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A University of Virginia cardiologist

artery disease. Their findings were reported in Thursday's New England Journal of Medicine.

The new technique combines traditional magnetic signal tests and a common dye with new software to yield more sensitive readings.

The researchers divided the heart images into 72 segments. In 78 percent of segments with no indication of dead tissue, heart function improved with a bypass or angioplasty, which send more blood to the heart.

In segments where more than 75 percent of the tissue looked dead, just 2 percent pumped more strongly after bypass or angioplasty.

"The data are exciting and quite promising," said Dr. George Beller, a University of Virginia cardiologist who wrote an accompanying editorial.

He said more research is needed on sicker patients.

New treatments used to test for cardiac victims

The studies could transform treatment for the millions who suffer from minor heart attacks, severe angina pain

NEW ORLEANS (AP)—Everyone hospitalized with a mild heart attack or bad chest pain should quickly get a cholesterol-lowering drug and undergo testing for possible angioplasty or bypass surgery, two large studies conclude.

The studies, released Wednesday, could transform treatment for the 1 million to 2 million Americans each year who go to the hospital with small heart attacks or severe angina pain.

One study found that immediately giving them the cholesterol-lowering drug Lipitor — regardless of their cholesterol levels — could reduce the risk of death, new heart attacks and other bad outcomes by 16 percent.

The other study found that routinely checking these patients' heart arteries with angiograms, then fixing blockages when necessary with bypass surgery or balloon angioplasty, could reduce these events by 18 percent.

Lipitor is already a mainstay of treating people with bad hearts. However, heart attacks can disrupt cholesterol readings, so doctors often wait a few weeks before starting patients on the medicines.

Dr. Christopher Cannon of Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, who conducted the angiogram research, said he believes

the results of both studies should immediately be put into practice.

Other doctors said the results may indeed change medical care, but they cautioned that doctors will need time to sort out the findings.

"It would be hard to recommend a blanket change in the way these patients are handled."

— Dr. Rodman Starke
American Heart Association

"Patients with a threatened or mild heart attack benefited from immediate and intense treatment [with Lipitor]," said Dr. Gregory Schwartz of the Denver Veterans Affairs Medical Center, who led the study.

The study suggests that fast across-the-board treatment is important, because patients do better no matter what their cholesterol level.

The researchers randomly assigned patients to get either Lipitor or

a dummy pill, in addition to all of the usual medicines, within a day or so of entering the hospital.

After 16 weeks of follow-up, 15 percent of the patients getting Lipitor had died, suffered a heart attack or cardiac arrest or needed emergency rehospitalization, compared with 17 percent in the comparison group.

The findings raise the possibility Cannon's study involved 2,220 patients who were randomly assigned to get standard care or to receive angiograms and artery-clearing treatments, if necessary, within four to 48 hours after reaching the hospital. They found that over the next six months, 16 percent of those getting the fast angiograms died, suffered heart attacks or were readmitted for bad chest pain. By comparison, 19 percent of those getting standard treatment had these bad outcomes.

Cannon said this study is the first to use state-of-the-art treatment, including struts to prop open newly reopened arteries and the anti-clotting drug Aggrastat.

However, Dr. Rodman Starke of the American Heart Association cautioned that catheterization labs necessary to do angiograms are not available everywhere.

"It would be hard to recommend a blanket change in the way these patients are handled"

Brazilian fly helps control ants

WASHINGTON (AP)—A tiny Brazilian fly whose larvae literally eat the heads off fire ants will be unleashed across the South under a government program to control the vicious ants that are a spreading menace to homeowners, farmers and wildlife.

The Agriculture Department, which claims the gnat-like phorid fly is of no danger to anybody or anything other than fire ants, announced plans Wednesday to release hundreds of thousands of them in the South and possibly in California, where the ants have now spread.

"It is a self-sustaining biocontrol," said Richard Brenner, who leads a USDA research team in Florida. "Twelve sites per state could blanket the state within five years."

Fire ants can make life miserable for homeowners and gardeners and cause billions of dollars in damage every year to air conditioners, electrical equipment and farms, experts say. The ants can blind and even kill livestock and wildlife, and the sting is occasionally fatal to humans.

The ants, native to South America, have no natural enemies in the United States. Chemical treatments are only effective temporarily.

"Anything that will take care of these fire ants will be

fine with me, as long as it doesn't hurt anything else or the environment," said Kym Bell, a Cottondale, Ala., woman whose 5-year-old daughter missed several days of kindergarten this fall because of repeated ant bites on her school playground. The stings left welts the size of a half dollar on her skin.

The phorid fly helps keep the ants under control in Brazil and Argentina.

The flies hover over ant mounds before darting down and injecting a torpedo-like egg into the ants. After one of the eggs hatches, the maggot decapitates the ant by eating the brain and other contents of the head. The maggot later turns into a fly and the cycle is repeated.

The flies do not kill enough of the ants to destroy colonies, but they do cause enough panic to keep the ants in check, Brenner said. The ants, which have an innate fear of the flies, stop foraging and flee when they spot them, giving native ants a chance to move back into the territory.

"You've got to have a really good competing ant population for the phorid flies to have an effect," said Brad Vinson, an entomologist at Texas A&M University.

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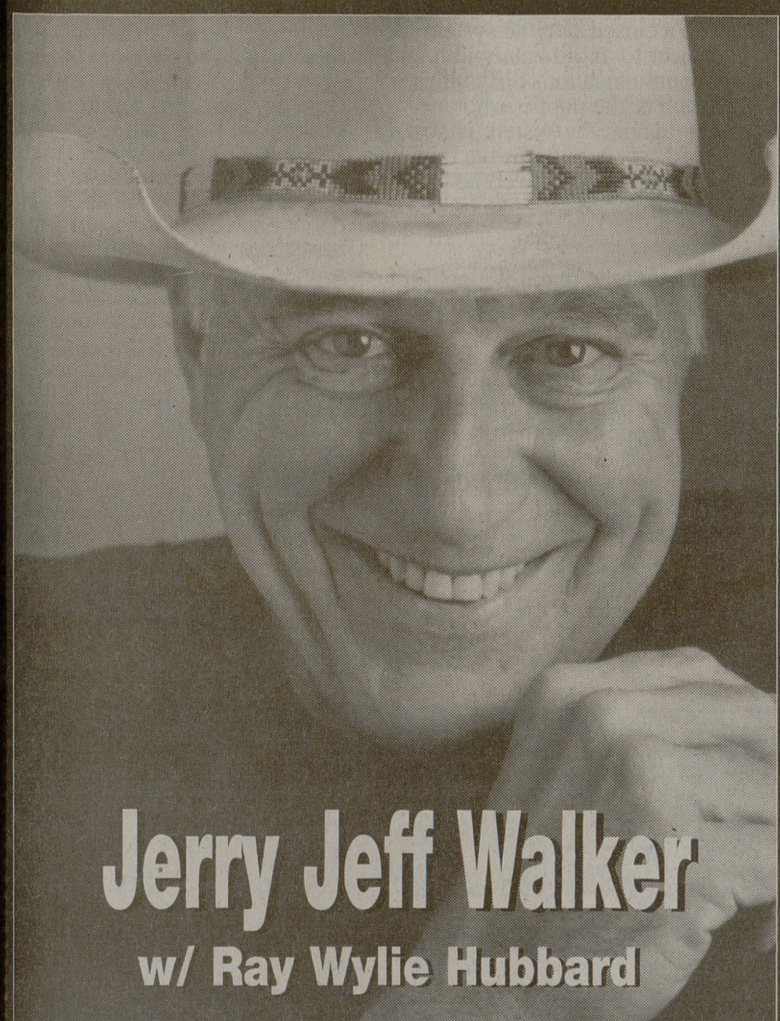
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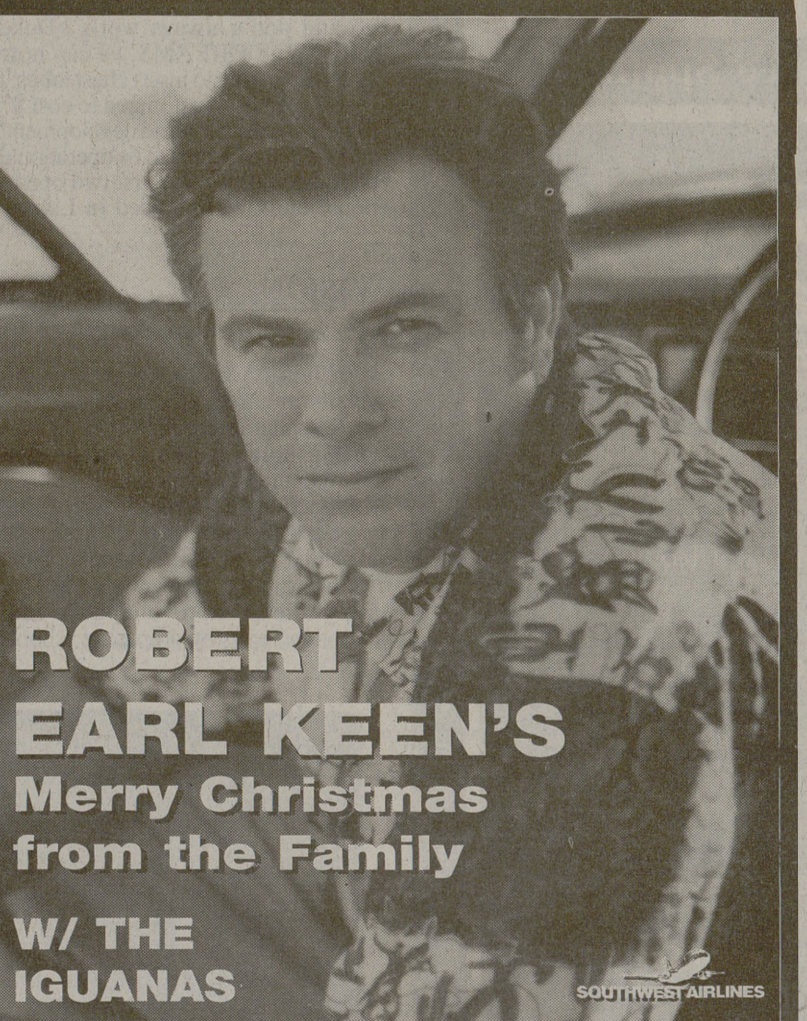
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