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Test of MS theory 'watershed moment' for St. Joe's

February 06, 2010

JOANNA FRKETICH
THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR
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Finding a treatment for multiple sclerosis holds as much promise for Hamilton as it does for patients.

St. Joseph's Hospital is one of just two places in Canada testing Italian vascular surgeon Dr. Paolo Zamboni's controversial theory that MS is a vascular disease -- a radical departure from long-held beliefs that it's an autoimmune condition. The University of British Columbia is the other place.



It has brought Hamilton to the attention of the world with about 22,000 MS patients from Asia to Africa to South America to all over the United States and Canada vying to be one of the 100 chosen for the study. It will also recruit 100 healthy people to take part.

"This is a watershed moment," said Dr. Ian Rodger, vice-president of research at St. Joseph's Healthcare. "Opportunities like this don't come along very often."

Hamilton has the chance because of McMaster's affiliation with Detroit imaging expert Dr. Mark Haacke, who met Zamboni in September when the Italian doctor held a conference about his theory.

Zamboni believes the veins draining blood from the brain are blocked and leaking in MS patients. This allows iron to leak into brain tissue and he thinks the buildup causes many symptoms of MS. Zamboni found those veins blocked or malformed in more than 90 per cent of MS patients he studied -- including his wife.

Haacke has long researched the role iron plays in MS and is eager to test Zamboni's theory. His main lab is in Detroit but he's also an adjunct professor at McMaster. With eight other Hamilton doctors, he plans to use St. Joseph's MRI, which is twice as strong as traditional machines, to look at the veins in the brains of MS patients and healthy people to see whether there is a difference.

Haacke says there has been a lot of resistance to Zamboni's theory -- cerebral spinal venous insufficiency (CCSVI) -- from medical professionals, particularly neurologists.

"It was just so flabbergasting to them," he said.

But the idea can't be ignored.

"We're going to have 10 years of fascinating research."

St. Joseph's, McMaster and Hamilton Health Sciences want to play a big role in that. They don't have funding yet, but are together putting in a proposal to the MS Society of Canada Tuesday for \$100,000 a year for two years.

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Rodger is leading the research and hoping other funders will come forward so that they can do a much bigger study that would produce results in 12 to 15 months instead of two years or longer. Philanthropists and/or their advisors are expected to be at the workshop Zamboni and Haacke are presenting in Hamilton tomorrow.

The stakes are high for MS patients, as there are few treatment options. Zamboni performs an experimental surgery similar to angioplasty to unclog the veins and improve blood flow. He says it has worked for his wife and others.

Hamilton MS patient Vasilios "Bill" Smyrniotis wants to know if that surgery could help him. The 50-year-old who was diagnosed 10 years ago can't walk anymore and has to live in supportive housing.

"This disease is relentless," he said. "It keeps getting worse. It has amazed me. I never expected to get like this."

He has newfound hope since researching Zamboni's theory.

"It was the first thing I've read in a long time that made sense."

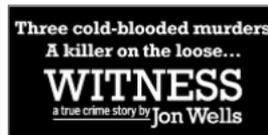
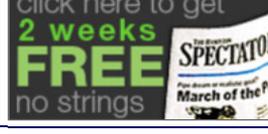
While St. Joseph's is studying the theory and hosting the conference, it is a long way from endorsing it.

"There's a great deal of skepticism about the observational study (that Zamboni did)," said Kevin Smith, CEO of St. Joseph's Healthcare. "A lot of the scientific community has already rejected the view. But it resonates profoundly with patients and families so it's our responsibility to determine if this is more than unusual observation."

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