

HEALTH & WELLNESS

Issues concerning the well-being of the African American community

Epidurals don't result in more C-sections

By MARTHA IRVINE
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CHICAGO — Epidurals — a type of anesthesia administered through the spine during childbirth — do not greatly increase the rate of Cesarean deliveries as previously suspected, researchers say.

An analysis of 10 clinical trials, published in last Wednesday's *Journal of the American Medical Association*, also found epidurals were more effective pain relievers and had less impact on the health of newborns than narcotic injections.

Dr. Stephen Halpern, co-author of the report, said he hopes the findings will put to rest some concerns about the use of epidurals and the stigma some women feel in asking for them.

"Basically, if a woman needs pain relief, she should feel free to ask for it," said Halpern, director of obstetrical anesthesia at Women's College Hospital in Toronto and an associate professor at the University of Toronto.

The clinical trials, conducted in Europe, the United States and Canada, included a total of 2,369 patients. Of the 1,183 who received epidurals, 97 women, or 8.2 percent, had babies delivered by Cesarean section. Of the 1,186 who received narcotic pain injections, 67 women, or 5.6 percent, had C-sections.

Halpern said he and his colleagues found epidurals are not the cause of C-sections. Rather, they are often used because complicated deliveries that end in C-sections are among the most painful, he said.

Scott McGlothlen, a certified nurse anesthetist in Denver, said he and his colleagues at St. Luke's Presbyterian Medical Center have actually found that epidurals decrease the number of C-sections.

"Some patients just can't quite get over that hump because of that pain and an epidural can help them do that," said McGlothlen, a spokesman for the American Association of Nurse Anesthetists.

Women in the studies who received epidurals also reported less pain, although their labors also were longer and they experienced side effects such as fevers more often. Newborns whose mothers had epidurals also were born less often with acidosis, a disturbance of the body's acid-base balance that can cause breathing problems and diarrhea.

McGlothlen said these findings reinforce what he's known for a long time.

"The beauty of this article ... is that it points out that certainly there are a number of mechanisms for pain control for women in labor," he said. "All of these things need to be made available to patients."

Either way, Margaret Ann Cross, a mother of two from Mertztown, Pa., says she's likely to go without an epidural or other pain-relieving medications in the future — just as she did five months ago when she had her second daughter in a hot tub with the help of midwives.

She said she had an epidural during the birth of her 4-year-old daughter and ended up with a medication-related headache for two weeks.

"It was awful," Cross said. "It was the worst time to be bedridden, when you're a new mom. Even though they say the chances of that happening are small, I wouldn't chance it again."

Equal access?

On Net, no doctor needed for powerful drugs

By LAURAN NEERGAARD
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — With a few computer keystrokes — and without ever seeing a doctor — Americans can buy powerful prescription drugs including some not approved for sale in this country.

Supporters say consumers are savvy enough to buy medicines over the Internet. But health experts fear the growing trend could endanger, even kill, patients. Several states are investigating Web sites, and the Drug Enforcement Administration has raided at least one Internet doctor as the government struggles with how to control drugs in cyberspace both here and abroad.

"Consumers are taking a huge risk. ... They may be risking their lives," warns William Hubbard of the Food and Drug Administration. "We're very concerned about this."

Yet some state regulators say they've never heard of the myriad Web sites that post such ads as: "Need Viagra? No prescription? No problem!"

How easy are such purchases? An Associated Press reporter bought from a British Web site a controversial diet drug that the U.S. government has not yet decided is safe. The unmarked brown envelope bearing a month's supply of Xenical cleared U.S. Customs. The unseen British pharmacist had no way to know the reporter had exaggerated her weight by 30 pounds to qualify for the drug.

A Viagra site promised to ship the little blue impotence pill after an AP reporter answered just one health question — and disclosed she was a woman.

"That's very, very dangerous," said consumer advocate Dr. Sidney Wolfe of Public Citizen, saying both were drugs for which the "patient" did not medically qualify.

"There is a reason that some of these drugs have to be prescribed," added Larry Lessly, director of Nevada's Board of Medical Examiners, which recently barred over-the-Internet sales unless Nevada doctors also see the patients. "People shouldn't just willy-nilly take them."

Colorado publicly reprimanded one doctor for selling Viagra over the Internet; Connecticut, Wyoming and Nevada ordered one Web site to stop selling in those states, and at least eight other states are investigating complaints.

North Carolina is probing Web sales of a computer program that teaches patients to diagnose their own problems and then pick a medication from foreign Web sites.

"Get self-prescribed medications without a doctor's prescription" including "experimental ... or unapproved drugs not yet available in the U.S.," the site promises. Patient testimonials declare success at buying controlled substances such as narcotic painkillers.

"It's a do-it-yourself doc-in-a-box," complained Dave Work of North Carolina's Board of Pharmacy.

The government determines which drugs need prescriptions — because they're for serious medical problems and can cause serious side effects.

Yet U.S. Web sites tout: Viagra, highly risky for certain men; Valtrex, which treats genital herpes but can kill patients with weak immune systems; Meridia, a diet drug that requires doctor monitoring because it can raise blood pres-

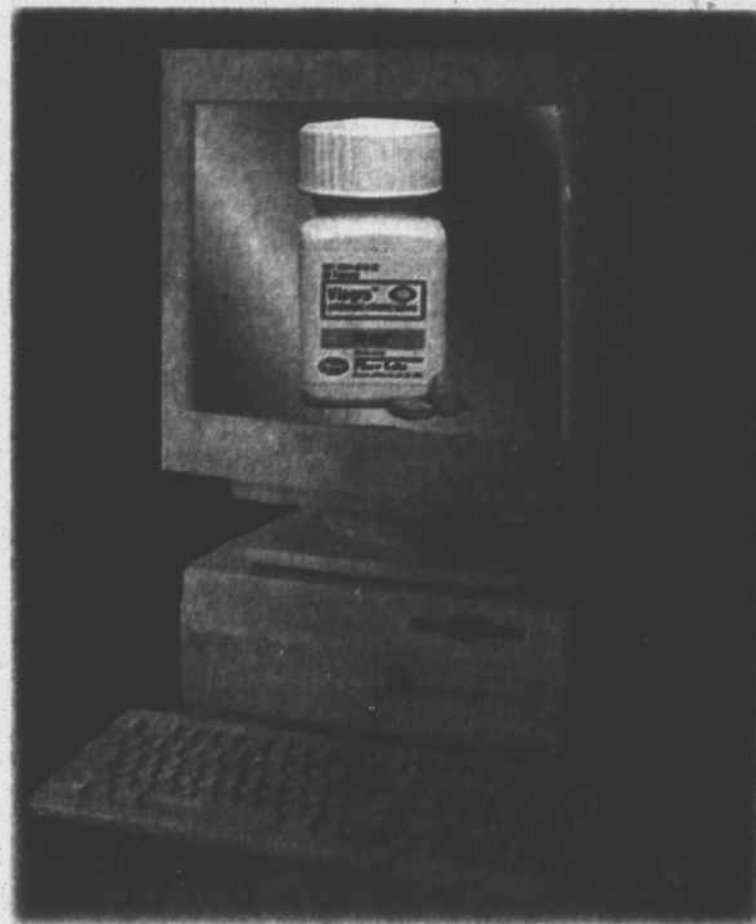


Photo illustration by Steven Moore
The Food and Drug Administration is concerned with the availability of prescription and illegal drugs to consumers in the Internet.

sure, and the diet drug phentermine, a controlled substance considered too dangerous for whole groups.

Spotted on foreign sites: stimulants, tranquilizers, antidepressants, antibiotics and drugs for epilepsy, dementia, diabetes and hypertension.

The Internet is making huge inroads in medicine, as doctors e-mail patients, online pharmacies mail refills and patients turn to medical journals now available 24 hours a day.

But it also has opened a

Pandora's box: Almost anyone can set up shop as an expert.

"I'm not a doctor, but I'm playing one on the Internet" is probably our worst nightmare," said Mark Herr of New Jersey's Division of Consumer Affairs.

Foreign drug sellers who don't need prescriptions in their own country can target Americans. And U.S. doctors and pharmacists, too, are selling to unseen Internet users across the country.

It is illegal for doctors to prescribe for patients in a state

where they're not licensed to practice. Licensed doctors also must meet standards of care that in most states require a patient relationship to prescribe drugs. But the rules were written before the Internet, so states aren't sure how to apply them in cyberspace and how to police ever-changing Web sites.

"It is a huge problem. We just don't have the resources to deal with all of them," said Mark Stafford of the Kansas Board of Healing Arts, which last month sued two Web sites to stop Internet Viagra sales in Kansas.

On the other side is veteran pharmacist William Stallknecht, who runs a popular Web site from his Pill Box Pharmacy in San Antonio, Texas. He says patients should be free to choose certain drugs without the hassle or embarrassment of in-person doctor visits.

"Patients have rights," said Stallknecht, who sells Viagra, the anti-baldness pill Propecia and the antihistamine Claritin over the Internet. "We take the care necessary" by requiring online health questionnaires reviewed by staff doctors.

Stallknecht says he ships 30 to 40 Viagra Internet orders a day and his doctors reject about 10 percent of applicants for health risks.

But critics say online questionnaires can't substitute for a doctor's exam. Asks consumer advocate Wolfe: How many men refused Viagra by local doctors turn to the Web? How many women wanting to lose a quick five pounds exaggerate their weight to buy a diet drug?

"The question we have is whether ... you can believe what a patient says in a questionnaire," said Steven Davis, Utah's chief licensing investigator.

Americans in country not exercising

By RUSS BYNUM
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ATLANTA — Americans in rural areas spend even less of their leisure time exercising than people in metropolitan areas, the government reported Wednesday.

Nearly a third of Americans may go at least a month without exercise, according to a 1996 survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The nearly 119,000 people sur-

veyed were asked if they had exercised outside work in the preceding month. Exercise was defined as running, golfing, walking or gardening. About 30 percent said they had not exercised — the same as in 1994.

In rural areas, 37 percent did not exercise, compared with 27 percent in metropolitan areas.

Although the results make it appear as if rural America is slacking off, the survey did not look at how much people sweat at

work. A suburbanite who sits behind a desk all day might need to jog more than a farmer tending his crops.

"We don't want to disappoint people who live in the country and call them lazy," said Dr. Helena Zabina, a CDC epidemiologist.

The study also found that college graduates were apt to be more active than high school dropouts, and people who earned more than \$50,000 a year were more likely to exercise than those who made less than \$10,000.

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