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Vapor Virus?



Our Columnist Questions the Science Behind Hepatitis C

By *Nicholas Regush*

Consider this a challenge in progress. This scientific adventure raises the question of whether the hepatitis C virus, blamed for a major silent epidemic of liver disease and even cancer, actually exists. **That's right. You read this correctly: I am raising a question that may disturb scientists and hepatitis C patients alike. But I'm raising it anyway because it is vital to do so in the interests of public health.**

I'm issuing a challenge to the scientific community to present me with the published, peer-reviewed scientific evidence that such a virus actually exists—namely that it has been properly isolated, according to accepted, fundamental principles of virology.

Hepatitis C is said to be a silent bloodborne epidemic that affects many millions who are unaware that they are ill. But do these people really have this virus? (A.Shepherd/ABCNEWS.com)

SUMMARY

Nicholas Regush raises red flags about the legitimacy and origins of the supposed hepatitis C virus.

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We are often condemned to rely heavily on the views of others, particularly when there appears to be strong scientific consensus.

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COMMENTARY

The C Files

Thus far, I should tell you, I'm underwhelmed by the evidence for the existence of such a virus. Before tackling this issue bluntly and in far more detail next week, I've decided to offer those who believe the science supporting the virus is adequate the opportunity to educate me on the subject. (We'll even run your letters.)

You can do this by providing me with key references for proof that hepatitis C virus is real and not some meaningless biotech concoction posing as a real virus. I plan to ignore any speculative theories, pole-vaults in reaching conclusions and the usual harangues from the medical and scientific community about the stupidity and irresponsibility of journalists. I have little patience for emotional approaches to this important scientific issue.

Many months ago, I wrote a column about hepatitis C, arguing that government officials botched proper testing of the blood supply for the virus. (A number of lawsuits are in progress, claiming the government was negligent.) In other words, I had automatically accepted the conventional wisdom that such a virus exists. I'm not blaming myself here; there is only so much research that one can do at any time, and we are often condemned, as I'm sure you will agree, to rely heavily on the views of others, particularly when there appears to be strong scientific consensus.

Inquiring Readers Want to Know

In response to that column, I have received a regular flurry of e-mail from readers who



For more information about hepatitis C, check this out.

E-MAIL US

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ask me to write more about hepatitis C, particularly about how this epidemic has been neglected by the government and medical community. So, in response to these letters, and out of genuine curiosity, I have been slowly, but systematically, exploring the scientific literature. What I discovered surprised me.

But first, let's look at the conventional wisdom on hepatitis C: Official estimates are that about 4 million Americans have been infected by the virus, that many don't know they're infected, and that some of these people (it's not clear how many) who now have no symptoms, will go on, perhaps in 20 or 30 years, to develop a scarring of their liver known as cirrhosis, which, in some cases, will lead to liver cancer.

Unknown Origins

The conventional wisdom says that this is a virus spread through direct contact with contaminated blood; that means through such routes as sex, sharing needles for drug use and, of course, blood transfusions, particularly in the '60s, '70s and '80s, before the blood supply was appropriately monitored. For many of the people, perhaps as many as half who have positive hepatitis-C antibody tests, the manner in which they may have contracted the virus remains a mystery.

Antiviral drugs, often in combination, are the main fighting force against hepatitis C, though, again according to the conventional wisdom, they appear to be only modestly effective in about half of patients and have serious side effects.

When scanning the literature, most of this type of information pops up again and again. And media reports on the science do not question the conventional wisdom, at least not the numerous ones I've perused. Yet, the more I read the science, the more troubling it appears, as I will reveal in some detail next week.

Challenge of the Week

As regular readers of this column know, I have taken it upon myself to call some of the conventional wisdom in medicine into question if adequate science has been bypassed in favor of speculation, hype and/or commercial gain.

What has especially energized me, of late, is the debate I still hope to have with Dr. Rodrigo Munoz, president of the American Psychiatric Association, over the science underlying the prescription of antidepressant drugs. Unfortunately, it looks as though Munoz is shying away from a public encounter with me, even after suggesting to me in an e-mail that he might be willing to take a crack at it.

Oh, well, maybe a prominent hepatitis C expert, perhaps even someone involved in the discovery of hepatitis C, will want to have a free-ranging public debate on what it means to isolate a virus.

To be continued. ■



Nicholas Regush produces medical features for ABCNEWS. In his weekly column, published Wednesdays, he looks at medical trouble spots, heralds innovative achievements and analyzes health trends that may greatly influence our lives. His latest book is [The Breaking Point: Understanding your Potential for Violence](#).



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