

After the Harley Street

WHEN Dr Cecilia Tregear hit 50, she had to acknowledge that age was beginning to catch up with her. 'I ate well, I exercised, but I was getting flabby, looking a lot older than my years and I felt very tired,' she says.

So she started on a form of treatment that is still relatively unfamiliar in this country — multiple hormone replacement therapy — and the results, she claims, were remarkable.

First she tested herself for hormone deficiencies. Most women are aware that levels of the sex hormones oestrogen and progesterone decline as you begin the slide into middle age. But levels of other equally important ones, such as testosterone, thyroid, DHEA, melatonin, cortisol and human growth hormone, have been falling, too, and they are rarely measured or replaced.

Dr Tregear then checked her BMI (Body Mass Index), which was 29 to 30 — officially overweight.

She adds: 'I was tired all the time, with menopausal symptoms, I had developed a goitre (an enlargement of the thyroid gland) and I had the early symptoms of osteoporosis.'

It was the kind of mix of unwelcome symptoms that's suffered by many women. But as the President of the British Society of Anti-Ageing Medicine and with a clinic in Wimpole Street, Dr Tregear was better placed than most to do something about it.

Two years later, after taking a very carefully controlled combination of bio-identical hormones, Dr Tregear felt transformed.

'My BMI was down to 23 and I was full of energy,' she says. 'The wrinkles had vanished from my skin. My brain worked much better and there was no sign of osteoporosis.'

And these are not just claims plucked out of the air. She kept meticulous charts and notes of her condition, and presented them at the World Anti-Ageing Conference in Paris last year.

Now 54, Dr Tregear claims that she looks closer to 30 than 30. However, her personal voyage has placed her at the centre of a fierce medical controversy that erupted last week over the effectiveness and safety of human growth hormone (HGH).

Is it really an elixir of life able to turn back the biological clock, or a potentially dangerous snake oil?

The debate was triggered by Harley Street plastic surgeon Dr Jeya Prakash — famous for his work on Jordan's assets — who claimed that he and his wife had been rejuvenated by daily injections of HGH.

'I feel more alive,' he enthused. 'My skin is shinier, my libido is up.'

So impressed is he that he plans to recommend it to his clients — mostly wealthy housewives whose husbands are successful businessmen.

Growth hormone is made in the pituitary gland in the brain and is vital for proper growth in children. Synthetic HGH is licensed to be used on children who don't produce enough naturally.

In adults, very low levels are linked with less muscle, excess fat, fatigue, lack of memory, sleep difficulties,

By **JEROME BURNE**

thinning skin, mental disturbances and personality changes in later years.

But it's not licensed as a treatment to reduce the effects of ageing, and there is no shortage of experts lining up to warn of the dangers.

They claim it can trigger cancer and cause diabetes as well as producing unpleasant side-effects such as muscle and joint pain, high blood pressure and carpal tunnel syndrome (a painful condition involving trapped nerves in the wrist).

An editorial in the British Medical Journal two years ago stated flatly that 'little or no evidence exists of an important positive functional effect (of HGH) on the process of ageing'. Consequently, using it as an anti-ageing treatment 'amounts to exploiting people and exposing them to unnecessary risk'.

In America, however, daily HGH shots to stave off the effects of ageing are seriously big business. Claims that it will turn back the clock like some kinds of hormonal plastic surgery form the basis for an industry worth an estimated £400 million.

The charges that it's dangerous and ineffective (published last year in the Journal of the American Medical Association) have been strongly challenged by the American Association of Anti-Ageing Medicine — not surprisingly, perhaps, but the latter does claim 11,500 doctors among its members.

Dismissing the concerns as a 'disinformation campaign' based on 'self-serving studies', the association put out a statement earlier this year saying that far from causing cancer, treatment with HGH can reduce the risk, and that the unpleasant side-effects only show up with high doses.

Its rebuttal refers to other studies which show that HGH can improve strength and mobility, reduce cardiovascular disease, osteoporosis and obesity, and boost immune function.

But this is not just a war of scientific references. What's really being fought

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guru who boasted of finding the elixir of youth...

This doctor says a cocktail of hormones is keeping her young. But what is the hidden price?

Beating the clock? Dr Cecilia Tregear (left) and Heather Bird-Tchengiz (inset) both took human growth hormone

It would have much effect on reasonably fit people in their 50s or 60s, but, frankly, the evidence just isn't there yet. The anti-aging people could do more to provide it.

In Europe there seems to be greater acceptance of the anti-aging approach.

The European Institute of Scientific Anti-Ageing Medicine runs a two-year course for registered doctors, which is recognised by several European universities. One of its units is devoted to the complexities of prescribing HGH.

'Critics claim that there is little evidence for the benefits of HGH, but that is because they have not read the literature,' says Thierry Hartogha, the institute's director.

There are now 466 placebo-controlled trials on HGH on the big internet database Medline. Do you know how many published double-blind trials there were on Viagra before it was marketed? Two. Fosse had three or four.

HE ALSO claimed that the alleged danger of diabetes through using HGH is a bit of a sack of understanding.

'It is well known that growth hormone increases insulin resistance,' he says. 'But that effect disappears after six months or so because HGH increases muscle mass and reduces fat, and that helps to reduce insulin sensitivity.'

The mechanisms involved in HGH will be just one of the topics discussed at the three-day Anti-Ageing Conference being held at the Royal Society of Medicine in London next week, with reports on a variety of developments in recent medical research.

The organiser of the conference is Heather Bird-Tchengiz, owner of the HBeImo in London.

A youngster in this business (she's still in her 30s), she has a highly prescriptive approach to HGH, using it briefly on three occasions to improve her own system in times of stress.

'I found it helped several years ago when I was antenatally busy setting up the clinic.

'I was really run down. My metabolism was functioning — was 13 years older than my chronological age. By correcting various hormone imbalances and some serious lifestyle changes, I got my biological age down by about ten years.

The next time she used it to help recover from an operation and a subsequent abscess that caused her to lose 20lb in two weeks. 'I was a walking skeleton and HGH helped to rebuild my muscles.'

She's taking it again now as part of a programme to get her hormones back in balance after pregnancy and a year's breastfeeding.

Heather's proactive use of hormones, albeit under the supervision of graduates of the European Institute's course, is a long way from the much more conservative treatment you would get for such conditions on the NHS and likely more expensive.

But unlike more traditional medicine, consumer satisfaction is a major factor in anti-aging medicine. The medical debate into the effectiveness or potential dangers of using HGH may continue for several years to come — but that's unlikely to stop the anti-aging market from growing and growing.

■ **SBChronic:** 020 7339 0163, www.hbhealth.com
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over is what medicine should be doing.

The big idea behind anti-aging medicine is that by a mixture of good nutrition, supplements and the careful balancing of your hormones, it's possible to stay biologically younger for longer.

It's a notion that the Medicines and Health products Regulatory Agency (the UK body responsible for licensing drugs) has no truck with. 'Anti-aging is a branch of cosmetics,' says a spokesperson. 'It's not considered as medicine.'

So who to believe? Can you achieve more for your health with such anti-aging treatments than you would by following the familiar healthy living advice of a good diet and plenty of exercise?

Dr Tregear says: 'If you take HGH with the right levels of the other hormones, you get a reduction in osteoporosis, and a drop in levels of cholesterol and other lipids in the blood, reducing your cardiovascular risk, as well as an improvement in memory and concentration.'

'You also get youthful looks and levels of energy, good libido and a better quality of life — all very real health benefits.'

What you shouldn't do, she says, is give HGH on its own as if it was some sort of drug, without carefully testing all the other hormones.

'For instance, if you have an overactive thyroid and you give HGH, it will make the condition worse,' she explains. 'Also, if a patient has weak adrenal glands and low

cortisol, HGH can be harmful.'

And the anti-aging regimes are made more complex because what you eat also interacts with the hormones. So diet, exercise and handling stress all form part of the package Tregear offers.

All of this is a far cry from the way the more familiar hormone replacement therapy (HRT) was, and still is, regularly prescribed, with everyone getting the same dose and little investigation into what your other hormones might be up to, let alone your diet.

Even so, the possible side-effects that emerged with HRT — cancer and heart disease — mean that HGH practitioners are cautious.

THIS was demonstrated when Dr Tregear treated Derek, who she describes as her most 'colourful' patient. 'I'm 74 but I look 60, and if you annoyed me in the pub, I'd punch you on the nose,' he declares at the start of our chat.

'When I began the course about 18 months ago, I was seeing a lot. Sitting in a low-slung sports car like my Aston Martin made my legs stiff for hours,' says the businessman who made a fortune and then retired to live in France. 'We had 13 holidays last year.'

Now he can run up stairs, has a good libido, low body fat, a cholesterol level of 3.5 (in low score)

and blood pressure of 130/90 — 'What you'd expect in a 20-year-old white,' he says proudly.

However, he stresses how careful Dr Tregear had been about any possible cancer risk.

'She did a whole range of tests and wouldn't put me on growth hormone until I'd been tested for colon and lung cancer.'

'Even then, she was very cautious with the doses. Recently she halved my HGH daily dose from 0.2 to 0.1 mg. For comparison, most Californian bodybuilders take around 1mg a day.'

David is obviously fairly fit anyway, and it's impossible to pinpoint exactly what it is that is making the difference. But there are going to be plenty more like him who are prepared to pay a lot to feel as good as they once did.

Another practitioner who specialises in keeping older men fit is Dr Michael Perrin of the Optimal Health Clinic in London.

'I've had one patient on HGH for a while and it works very well for him,' he says. 'But it is a growth promoter, so I believe the cancer risk is very real. Combining other hormones can be very effective. But if I can get a shift in someone's energy with exercise and good nutrition, I'd rather do that.'

Mainstream medical experts are still pretty sceptical of the use of hormone users such as David are claiming. 'There is no conclusive evidence that supplementing with human growth hormone is going to

Picture: TERRY BRADFORD



benefit healthy older people who can exercise,' says Dr Pinbar Martin, consultant in geriatrics at Guy's and St Thomas Hospital in London.

On the other hand, he recently ran a trial using a combination of low doses of HGH and testosterone on men over 50. 'We did find that they had improved muscle strength and more aerobic activity,' he says. 'There was no effect with either hormone on its own, but using low doses reduced side-effects significantly.'

He's also found HGH can help elderly people who suffer from severely reduced muscle strength to recover faster. So is there value in multiple hormone replacement?

'It's possible, but probably only for people who are already pretty fit,' says Dr Martin. 'I doubt that