

RECRUITMENT APPEAL!

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED FOR WORLD-FIRST TRIAL TO PREVENT CHILDHOOD ASTHMA

Monday April 3, 2006

Australian scientists have today launched a world-first research trial into a treatment that could prevent asthma in high risk children.

The treatment, developed by Professors Pat Holt and Peter Sly at Perth's Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, involves exposing babies and toddlers to tiny doses of common allergens as an oral vaccine to stimulate immune responses which protect against allergy.

The children will be given daily drops under the tongue of house dust, grass and cat allergen over a 12 month period. They will then be monitored closely for three years.

"If we can prevent allergies in young children, we should be able to prevent them going on to develop asthma that is triggered by the allergies," Professor Holt said.

"We expect that the drops will act, in effect, as an asthma vaccine - educating the immune system to avoid harmful responses to these allergens.

"However, it's important to understand that this vaccine would never be a one-off dose, but a sustained course of treatment over months to gradually modify the immune reaction."

The research team said the problem with traditional approaches is that they start too late - after a child has already developed an allergy.

"We already know that children with a family history of allergies or asthma are at a much higher risk of developing serious asthma that will persist into adulthood," Professor Sly said.

"The innovative aspect to this approach is that we want to target these children very early in life and teach their immune system to ignore these allergens - well before they've even developed an allergic reaction, let alone asthma."

The project has won widespread support from major childhood asthma centres throughout the world and is being funded by the US National Institutes of Health.

The international research trial will initially involve 200 children in Perth, Melbourne and New York. Later stages will expand to Germany and Sweden.

"This is a radical new approach to preventing asthma that has not been tried before," Professor Holt said.

"Given that so many of these children progress from allergies to asthma, there is an enormous potential benefit to the child and to the whole community in adopting a truly preventative approach."

Up to 40 per cent of Australian children suffer from allergies and asthma and it is the single most common reason for children to be admitted to hospital.

To participate in the trial:

Children aged between 18 and 30 months may be eligible for the study if they have eczema, food allergies and a family history of asthma or allergies.

Parents wanting to find out more can phone 9489 7813

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