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Toxic Hope : Widely Embraced, The Aids Drug Is Now Under Heavy Fire. : The Azt Story

June 20, 1993 | Linda Marsa | *Omni contributing editor Linda Marsa is writing a book about drug development. Her last article for this magazine was on cancer research at UCLA*

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These concerns crystallized by 1990, when evidence began to trickle out that AZT wasn't so terrific, that only half the people with AIDS could tolerate the drug, that it caused vaginal cancer in laboratory animals. One study, conducted by Samuel Broder at the National Cancer Institute, revealed that people who took AZT for two to three years had a 49% incidence of lymphoma, a cancer of the lymph glands, compared to about 2% of AIDS patients who didn't take AZT.

Another study, conducted by researchers at the Veterans Administration on asymptomatic patients, was even more alarming. "Our study showed AZT didn't make you live longer, says John D. Hamilton, of the VA Medical Center in Durham, N.C., and principal investigator or the study. "It delayed the symptoms due to AIDS. But it carried with it adverse side effects. Our thinking was that if you don't get any survival benefit, what it boils down to is deciding whether you want to have symptoms of HIV or symptoms of AZT.

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It's also interesting to take a closer look at 1989 studies that, according to Volberding, "show an absolutely monotonously consistent halving of the progression rate. So progression rates go from 7.6% (for those on placebo) to 3.6% (for those taking AZT), or in that range. "That means that 7.6 HIV patients out of every 100 progress to AIDS if they don't take AZT; 3.6 patients progress to AIDS if they do take it. So doctors are administering a toxic chemotherapy to 100 people in hopes that four of them will progress more slowly to AIDS.

What's more, after several years of treatment, HIV becomes resistant to AZT.

Richard Beltz is a professor of biochemistry at Loma Linda University. In 1961, working on a grant from the National Cancer Institute, he synthesized the compound that came to be known as AZT.

Beltz never published his results, so bragging rights for discovering AZT belong to Jerome Horowitz, another cancer researcher who formulated the compound independently in 1964 but did not patent it. But Beltz never forgot about his creation. "I thought about patenting it, he said. "But I finally decided against it because resistance developed so fast. Anybody who works with AZT for even a short time can see that.

At the FDA hearings in January, 1987, when AZT was approved, panel members did voice concerns about the possibility of resistance. But Burroughs Wellcome's scientists stoutly denied seeing any