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HEALTH BEAT: NEUROLOGY AND COGNITION

Vasectomy may be linked to dementia

By Leslie Goldman
Special to the Tribune

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As if men needed another reason to be skittish about a vasectomy.

A recent study by Northwestern University researchers revealed that men with a rare kind of dementia are more likely to have had a vasectomy than those who do not have cognitive problems. Called Primary Progressive Aphasia, or PPA, this dementia affects an individual's ability to express himself, impairing word recall and ability to understand words. The research was published in *Cognitive and Behavioral Neurology*.

Clinical neuropsychologist Sandra Weintraub, a professor of psychiatry and neurology at the Cognitive Neurology and Alzheimer's Disease Center at the Northwestern Feinberg School of Medicine, became attuned to the possible correlation when one of her patients became near-obsessed that his PPA symptoms started in the years after his vasectomy. "I thought, 'That's a theory,' but it seemed so far-fetched," Weintraub said.


So imagine her surprise when, at a twice-yearly support group she holds for PPA (as well as another type of dementia called frontotemporal dementia) patients, this man, then 47, stood up and asked, "How many men in this room have PPA?" and nine hands went up? Then, he asked, "How many of you have had a vasectomy?" Eight hands raised in the air. Weintraub was impressed and gathered a team of researchers who looked at 47 men with PPA and 57 men free from cognitive impairment, all ranging in age from 55 to 80. The results: 40 percent of PPA patients had undergone a vasectomy, as opposed to just 16 percent of those without the illness.

"We thought it was a pretty striking difference," Weintraub said. Though the procedure may increase a person's chances of developing PPA, it doesn't mean it will lead to the early-onset dementia, which Weintraub described as particularly heart-wrenching, because it strikes people in their 40s and 50s.

Here's the theory behind the link: A blood-testes barrier exists, just like a blood-brain barrier exists. Post-vasectomy, that protective blood-testes barrier is broken, and semen enters the blood. "Sixty to 70

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percent of men will develop antibodies which try to kill the sperm," Weintraub explained, as the immune system views the sperm as foreign agents. "The question is whether these antibodies are somehow interacting with the brain, too," thus creating damage resulting in PPA.

So is Weintraub advocating any changes in behavior regarding the male birth-control procedure? "Absolutely not," she said. "Vasectomy is certainly a very important option for some families to have."

Added Dr. Kalyan C. Latchamsetty, assistant professor in the department of urology at Rush University Medical Center, "Based on this study, I would not discourage patients from seeking vasectomy. It is still considered a very safe procedure, and urologists have been performing vasectomies for numerous years. Having said that, however, this article raises an interesting topic, and further investigation is probably warranted."

Which is exactly what Weintraub has planned: She is going to conduct a national study to see if the results uncovered at Northwestern can be replicated.

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