

Doctors, families fought for approval of Huntington's disease drug

By Rita Rubin, USA TODAY

Jonathan Monkemeyer, an engineer by training, worked long and hard on the heartfelt four-minute talk he presented at a packed Food and Drug Administration advisory committee meeting last December. But even without saying a word, Sheryl Monkemeyer was far more expressive than her husband could ever be.



By Joan Fairman Kanes for USA TODAY

Sheryl Monkemeyer has been taking tetrabenazine, the first drug for the inherited disease Huntington's, to improve her ability to focus and engage in physical activities, including tennis, which she and her son Jonathan, 10, play outside their Newton Square, Pa., home after school.

While seated, Monkemeyer's wife moved constantly. Her legs jerked so much that she kicked off her boots and scooted her chair back 6 inches, nearly into the lap of the person behind her. She couldn't help it. The former registered nurse, 45, has Huntington's disease, an inherited, incurable degenerative brain disorder that killed her father.

The uncontrolled movements that characterize the disease make it difficult for her to ride in a car, but she and her husband had driven 125 miles from their suburban Philadelphia home to the FDA meeting in a Sheraton Hotel ballroom in Beltsville, Md. Their goal: to help convince panelists that the FDA should approve tetrabenazine, which would be the first drug approved in the USA for any symptom of Huntington's disease. Huntington's afflicts 30,000 Americans, as many as cystic fibrosis, another, better-known genetic disorder.

The story of how tetrabenazine finally won FDA approval is one of desperate Huntington's disease families and dedicated doctors who were used to having their hopes dashed when one experimental drug after another failed to live up to its promise.

More than a dozen family members testified before the advisory committee about the horrors of Huntington's and the benefit of tetrabenazine, and, says Barbara Boyle, executive director of the Huntington's Disease Society of America, "when they finished there wasn't a dry eye."

Tetrabenazine neither cures nor slows the disease — no drug yet has been shown to do that — but it's the most effective treatment for the uncontrolled movement called chorea, Greek for "dance." (The disease is sometimes still referred to as Huntington's chorea.) Typically, Huntington's symptoms first appear in middle age, and death occurs 10 to 30 years later.

The FDA advisers voted unanimously to recommend approval. In August, the agency gave Prestwick Pharmaceuticals in Washington, D.C., permission to market tetrabenazine as Xenazine. Last month, Ovation Pharmaceuticals in Deerfield, Ill., acquired the U.S. license from Prestwick.

"Recognizing that patients have been waiting a long time for this treatment, we are working diligently to expedite availability of Xenazine, which we expect will happen before the end of the year," Ovation spokeswoman Sally Young said Friday.

Columbia University neurologist Nancy Wexler, who spearheaded the research leading to a genetic test for Huntington's, says she had hoped the FDA wouldn't need an advisory committee meeting "because the merits of this drug were so obvious." But, says Wexler, whose mother died of Huntington's, "I think there were a lot of misconceptions about how debilitating these incredibly engulfing, abnormal movements are."

Three people were needed to feed her mother, Wexler says: one to hold her head still, one to hold her arms and one to spoon food into her mouth.

"Even if you have just a tiny bit of abnormal movement," says Wexler, president of the Hereditary Disease Foundation, "it can make it difficult to do anything normal: brushing your teeth, eating, doing the dishes."

At his tidy, plant-filled home on a leafy street in Newtown Square, Pa., Jonathan Monkemeyer apologizes for the faint food stains on the ceiling above the kitchen sink and for the plastic tumblers in which he serves iced tea.

In another family's home, the stains and plastic cups would suggest the presence of an active toddler. At the Monkemeyers, they are mute testimony to the disease that began attacking his wife's brain a decade earlier.

"My wife bites her lip, her tongue, the sides of her mouth," Monkemeyer, 42, told the FDA advisers. "She grinds her teeth together and smashes into them with utensils. Unless she sits in the middle (car) seat, she smashes the side of her head into the passenger door window. Even with my help and padded walls in our shower, she split open her head on the towel rack."

After the meeting, Monkemeyer began getting tetrabenazine directly from Cambridge Laboratories, its Irish maker. He has become adept at splitting the pale yellow, aspirin-sized pills in half and, if need be, into quarters, and then serving them in applesauce. Too much tetrabenazine, and he has found his wife becomes sleepy and depressed. Too little, and her chorea worsens.

"I think Sheryl would be really, really far gone if she didn't have it," Monkemeyer says.

After her first dose, his wife could eat without choking, a common complication that can lead to deadly pneumonia if food goes down the wrong pipe.

Even on the medication, Sheryl Monkemeyer still fidgets non-stop as she sits on their couch, repeatedly knocking pillows off. Her speech is hard to understand, and you can feel her bones when you hug her. All that excess movement can burn thousands of calories a day, Wexler says.

But when her husband showed a reporter his prototype for an online gathering place for Huntington's researchers, she got off the couch and stood behind him at the computer for at least 15 or 20 minutes without falling.

At a graduation party this past summer, Monkemeyer says, his wife tickled guests by whacking a whiffle ball two times in a row. And she has amazed their neighbors by hitting a tennis ball in the front yard with their 10-year-old son, who's also named Jonathan.

Since his mom started taking tetrabenazine, "she's a lot more normal," says Jonathan, a fifth-grader who inherited his mother's delicate features and her love of reading and writing. He already has figured out that, like any child of an affected parent, he has a 50-50 chance of having inherited Huntington's disease.

One welcome side effect of tetrabenazine's approval has been hope, says Boyle of the Huntington's Disease Society. "This is something that said to our families: You know, we have a drug. We can get others. We're on our way to treating a disease."

Find this article at:

http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2008-10-27-huntingtons-disease-main_N.htm