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HEALTH BEAT

DISCOVERIES NEW SCIENCE FINDINGS

Gene may protect skin

A gene that is known to play a key role in suppressing cancer also seems to protect against sun damage while promoting a golden tan. People who tan easily are much less likely to develop melanoma. "This finding provides us an opportunity to look at human populations and start to identify what is regulating the risk of developing skin cancer," said senior study author Dr. David Fisher of Harvard Medical School.

It's not just the genes

If you're the child of parents who lived to 85 or more, your risk for heart disease in middle age is significantly lower than children of parents who died earlier, researchers report. Nevertheless, "things like whether you smoke, how you eat, whether you get exercise are tremendously important and probably overshadow the genetics, because your genes aren't particularly important in determining whether you die at 70 or 80," said study author Dr. Clyde B. Schechter of Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York.

Oh, what a relief

Two small pilot studies have found that electrical stimulation of the occipital nerve in the back of the head helped ease the agony of cluster headaches, which some have likened to getting stuck in the eye with a hot poker. "There were no significant side effects, no unintended consequences," one headache expert said. The researchers hope to do further tests on more people.

Predict oncologist shortfall

The United States will suffer a significant shortage of cancer doctors over the next two decades, coinciding with an increased need for these specialists by aging Americans, a new report warns. Experts predict a shortfall of as many as 4,080 oncologists by 2020. The shortage is being fueled, on the demand side, by an aging population and more cancer survivors and, on the supply side, by slowed growth in the number of available oncologists as more of them reach retirement age.

HealthDay News

NEUROLOGY AND COGNITION

Vasectomy may be linked to dementia

By Leslie Goldman | Special to the Tribune

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.

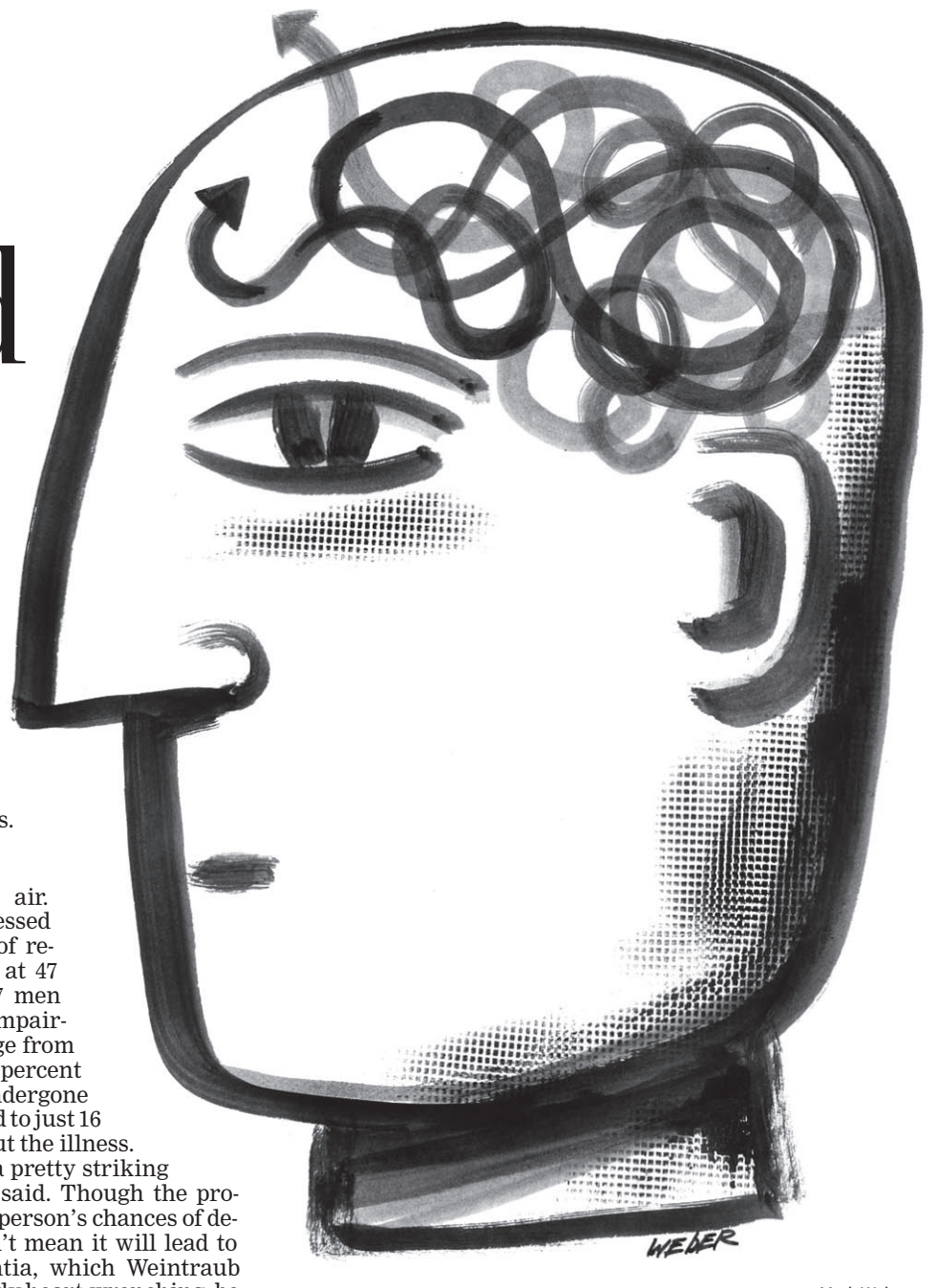
Tribune photo by Michael Tercha

Clinical neuropsychologist Sandra Weintraub

"We thought it was a pretty striking difference," Weitraub 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 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."



Mark Weber

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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CAFFEINE QUIZ

Getting your fill

By Gwen Schoen
McClatchy/Tribune newspapers

Can't get moving until you've had your regular dose of caffeine? If the line at Starbucks is any indication, you are not alone. How much do you know about the caffeine in your diet? Here's a quiz to find out.

1. Caffeine is a substance that exists naturally in certain plants, including tea leaves, kola nuts and coffee and cocoa beans.

True or false?

2. Caffeine also can be produced synthetically and added to foods and beverages.

True or false?

3. Manufacturers aren't required to list the amount of caffeine on nutrition labels.

True or false?

4. For most people, moderate doses of caffeine, 200 to 300 milligrams a day, aren't harmful.

True or false?

5. More than 500 milligrams of caffeine a day can cause irritability, nervousness, anxiety, insomnia, headaches and diarrhea.

True or false?

6. Some evidence suggests that drinking coffee may cause Type 2 diabetes and colon cancer.

True or false?

7. Some types of medications and herbal supplements negatively interact with caffeine.

True or false?

8. All pain relievers contain caffeine.

True or false?

Source: The Mayo Clinic

Answers: (1) True; (2) True; (3) True; (4) True; (5) True; (6) False; (7) True; (8) False

When things begin to clog, blood doesn't flow properly.

When things begin to clog, blood doesn't flow properly.

Provide the name of your primary care physician to schedule your appointment. He or she will receive a copy of your results to determine if follow up is necessary.

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