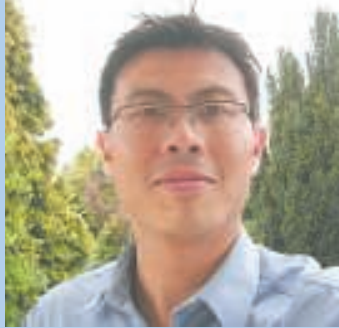


Beware Drug “Breakthroughs”: Statins

Sometimes the news acts like an advertising channel for drugs. Brand-new research is mentioned, the pills are shown with someone in a lab coat, a phrase including the words “breakthrough”, “remarkable” and “saving lives” thrown in, all topped off with an expert in a suit recommending it. Statins, for lowering cholesterol, are the biggest-selling drugs in the world. Big news: drug-company-funded research found that prescribing statins to quite healthy people cut their heart attack and stroke risk in half. True to format, health experts appeared on the news claiming that this was a breakthrough which would save lives. Wall St was happy because the potential market for this particular statin expanded tremendously overnight with billions of dollars more sales per year forecast.

Let’s nit-pick: halving the number of deaths from heart attack and strokes sounds impressive, but in fact not many happened during the



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drug trial anyway. What the drug did was reduce a small number into a smaller number. Overall, the absolute risk of having a stroke or heart attack went down just 0.9%, from 1.8% to 0.9%. (Using the “cut in half” statistic sounds better, huh). In fact, to prevent a single death using the drug, 240 person years worth of the drug has to be swallowed, at a cost of over a million dollars (once doctor’s visits etc are included). A real “breakthrough”.

The only certainty per patient then is 1) the considerable health dollars required, and 2) how brutally inefficient the drug is at saving lives. So the headlines were correct. This could potentially save tens of thousands of lives – but only if you prescribe the drugs to millions at a cost of billions. Some doctors joked about putting it in the US water supply.

While experts last week were suggesting billions of dollars in new spending on a drug to improve heart health for a very few, no one was proposing billions in new spending for boring yet scientifically proven ways to improve heart health: reduce smoking, improve exercise and diet, get better sleep. These steps would help every person who committed to them, improving their cardiovascular health tremendously. But these kinds of initiatives remain too unfashionable to be given equal attention. The pricey “more drugs equals more health” fixation continues.

This content reflects personal opinions of Dr Tat Loo, a Dunedin-based chiropractor.

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