Highlights from the 2007 American Academy of Neurology Meeting

More than 10,000 practicing neurologists and researchers from around the world gathered at the 59th annual meeting of the American Academy of Neurology in Boston in April. Well over 200 MS-related presentations were made, many involving researchers funded by the National MS Society.

Follow-up studies of approved therapies
Researchers reported on a follow-up to the BENEFIT study, in which treatment with Betaseron (interferon beta-1b, Bayer HealthCare Pharmaceuticals) delayed onset of clinically definite MS in people at high risk for the disease compared with people who did not receive treatment. In the follow-up study, both groups are now receiving Betaseron. The results after one year show that early treatment with Betaseron reduced the risk for disease progression by 40%. The study is continuing for two more years.

More than 5,700 people have received infusions of Tysabri (natalizumab, Biogen Idec and Elan Pharmaceuticals) in the U.S. through the mandatory TOUCH prescribing program. The overall rate of serious allergic reactions to infusions has been 0.8%—most of the people who experienced these had received Tysabri before its suspension from the market. They experienced anaphylactic reactions after being re-dosed after an extended period without treatment.

Data from the AFFIRM trial, which compared Tysabri against an inactive placebo, suggest that the drug’s benefits continued beyond two years. Tysabri continued to decrease both relapse rates and progression of disability.

AN MS HIGHLIGHT: the 2007 John Dystel Prize for Multiple Sclerosis Research, given jointly by the Society and the American Academy of Neurology, was presented to Dr. Howard Weiner at the meeting. (See the June–July issue, p. 27.) From the left, Dr. John Richert, executive vice president of the Society’s Research & Clinical Programs, Dr. Weiner, and Dr. Fred Lublin, chair of the Dystel Prize subcommittee.
Experimental infusions
Two groups reported on studies of Rituxan (rituximab, Genentech and Biogen Idec) for MS. In Canada, researchers studying the safety of Rituxan in 26 people with relapsing MS reported a significant reduction in relapses and MRI-detected brain lesions.

Researchers in California studying the drug versus an inactive placebo reported that the number of active lesions in the 69 people with relapsing MS taking the drug were reduced by 91%. They also had significantly fewer relapses. A clinical trial in the U.S. and Canada involving 435 people with primary-progressive MS is ongoing.

Tools to measure disease activity
The eyes may be the “windows to the soul,” but recent research also suggests they may be a window to monitoring MS as well. Several investigative teams, including the Society’s Nervous System Repair team led by Dr. Peter Calabresi (Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore), reported on the use of a new technique called OCT (optical coherence tomography), which measures the thickness of the nerve layer at the back of the eye. It may prove to be a simple tool to detect disease progression.

Symptom management
Can sleep disorders contribute to fatigue? Investigators using “polysomnography,” a technique that measures brain activity, airflow and other phenomena during sleep, found that all 27 of the people with MS they studied had sleep abnormalities that could contribute to fatigue. These included obstructive sleep apnea, delayed REM onset, and impaired sleep efficiency. The researchers concluded that people complaining of fatigue in MS should have sleep studies done to evaluate the possibility of unrecognized sleep disorders.

To read more highlights from the AAN meeting, go to nationalmssociety.org/Bulletins, or call your chapter and ask for a copy.

To download the abstracts of all presentations given at this year’s meeting, visit: www.abstracts2view.com/aan2007boston.

Open borders: The MS Coalition
In June, the Consortium of Multiple Sclerosis Centers held its first-ever joint meeting with ACTRIMS and LACTRIMS (Americas Committee for Treatment and Research in Multiple Sclerosis and the Latin American Committee for Treatment and Research in Multiple Sclerosis, respectively). Over 1,500 people in the MS movement were in Washington, DC, to attend.

On the first day of the meeting, the nine-member Multiple Sclerosis Coalition met together to establish a game-plan for the coming year. To learn more about how MS organizations are collaborating visit multiplesclerosiscoalition.org.

Joyce Nelson, CEO and president of the National MS Society, spoke informally: “All of us understand how big MS problems are,” Nelson said. “This meeting means we also understand that we can make a bigger impact if we work together. The Society is proud to be part of this.”