

## Psychologists question “debriefing” for traumatised employees

Gavin Yamey *BMJ*

UK employers are using a type of counselling known as debriefing for employees who have experienced psychological trauma, despite evidence that the technique is ineffective or even harmful, according to research presented at the British Psychological Society’s annual occupational psychology conference last week.

The Institute for Employment Studies, an independent employment research organisation, assessed the debriefing interventions offered to employees of 18 different UK organisations. These included emergency medical services, hospital trusts, and industrial and financial institutions. All routinely offered debriefing, in which employees are encouraged to recall the details of a traumatic event and discuss their emotional reactions to it.

But in its literature review of

debriefing for symptoms of traumatic stress, commissioned by the Health and Safety Executive, the institute found only six randomised controlled trials. Two showed that the intervention was of benefit, two showed no difference between intervention and control groups, and two showed a detrimental effect in the intervention group. The authors believe that debriefing may “retraumatise” some individuals.

Despite these findings, only two organisations studied by the institute had mechanisms to evaluate whether debriefing was of benefit to their employees, and how debriefing was administered varied widely.

Dr Jo Rick, principal researcher at the institute, said: “All organisations offered one session of debriefing to employees, but there was massive variation in who delivered it, who was



An exhausted worker rests after the Paddington rail crash in October. “Debriefing” may not help such people

offered it, the length of the sessions and of follow up. However, there is a lack of evidence that debriefing is effective in industry settings, and some general research evidence suggests that there are circumstances in which it is harmful.”

Health and safety legislation compels employers to protect both the physical and psychological wellbeing of employees ([www.hse.gov.uk](http://www.hse.gov.uk)). Dr Rick believes that organisations use debriefing as an automatic response to stressful events

because it is a “ready made” framework.

The institute suggests urgent re-evaluation of its use in the workplace. Its next research project is to study the most effective mechanisms that employers should use to protect the mental health of their workforce. □

The institute’s literature review on debriefing, *Workplace Trauma and its Management*, is available through the HSE bookshop’s website, [www.hsebooks.co.uk/homepage.html](http://www.hsebooks.co.uk/homepage.html), price £44.

## Scientists identify gene to prevent atherosclerosis

Rory Watson *Brussels*

A British led group of researchers, with funding from the European Union, has identified and is developing a gene that could prevent atherosclerosis.

The multinational team of scientists is aiming to complete the first phase of its clinical safety trial in Finland this year, and 18 months later to finalise its analysis of some 200 patients who are receiving the treatment during surgical operations.

The group, coordinated by Professor John Martin of University College London and with members in Germany, Finland, and Italy, has been working for six years on ways to tackle the cause of 55% of deaths in the European Union: the narrowing of human arteries in the heart, brain, and legs.

Reporting in Brussels last

week on the results achieved, Professor Martin said that the team had found that a gene which is essential in pregnancy for the growth of blood vessels in the fetus (vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF)) has a different role in adults, in whom it protects arteries against daily wear and tear.

The team has shown that when the wall of the artery is damaged the gene travels to the endothelium, causing the release of nitric oxide and prostacyclin into the arterial wall; this helps to protect the wall against inappropriate healing after damage.

The researchers are now perfecting ways of delivering the gene from outside the arteries during surgery. They have devised a biodegradable reservoir, which can be attached to the artery and acts immediately as a motor producing vascular endothelial growth factor every day for months.

In addition to using the growth factor as a treatment in surgery for atherosclerosis, Professor Martin hopes that within the next decade it will be possi-

ble to develop it in tablet form so it can be taken to prevent hardening of the arteries.

He has drawn two main lessons from the scientific breakthrough. The first is the importance of genuine cooperation between different centres of excellence in Europe, nurtured with the help of EU research funding.

“These discoveries would not have been possible without a combined European team. Each member of the team analysed one aspect of the problem. Cell biology and coordination was undertaken in the UK, clinical research and gene therapy in Finland, animal pharmacology in Italy, and the plasmid development in cell biology in Germany,” he explains.

The second lesson is the importance of patents. The research led to two patents, one for the use of a gene for vascular endothelial growth factor as a protector of human arteries, and the second for the biodegradable reservoir.

Both are now being exploited by the small company Eurogene, which was established two and a

half years ago to turn the research into medicine for patients. University College London holds 15% of the company and will be able to use part of the profits it generates to fund university research. □

## Correction

*Doctors suspended in child health inquiry*

Owing to an error in the editing of this news article (1 January, p 9), it was stated that the trial at the North Staffordshire Hospital of a new technique—continuous negative extrathoracic pressure (CNEP)—involved only 122 premature babies, when in fact it involved 244 premature babies. Each arm of the trial comprised 122 babies. Consequently, the two subsequent sentences should have said: “Of the 122 babies treated with the new technique, 28 died and 15 sustained brain damage. Of the 122 babies in the control group, who received conventional treatment, 22 infants died and 10 experienced brain damage.”