

An Aspirin A Day, Keeps the Cardiologist At Bay

The ISIS-2 trial results have come with a big bang. Over 50% reduction in one month mortality after an acute myocardial infarction was achieved by a combination of intravenous Streptokinase plus daily half a 325 mg tablet of Aspirin. What is even more exciting for the third world is the finding that Aspirin or intravenous Streptokinase alone reduced mortality about the same, i.e. by around 30% each! This is remarkable considering that Aspirin costing a few paisas did the job equally well compared to the Rs. 4000/- (over \$ 200/-) infusion of Streptokinase. The trial involving 17,187 patients in 417 hospitals throughout Europe, North America and Australia was co-ordinated by the Oxford team. It is unlikely that a trial of this size will be repeated soon and these results will stand true, I believe, for a long time. If Pakistan has the same incidence of myocardial infarction as the West, then we can expect to see 250,000 heart attacks every year and expect to save about 10,000 lives every year by simple Aspirin prescription in this group. If the incidence of heart attacks in Pakistan is half that in the West, even then 5,000 lives every year can be saved by this very cheap therapy as we still cannot afford Streptokinase for routine use in our patient population.

The other trial which was completed and had its results released in early 1988 was Physicians' Health Study with 22,000 American physicians between 40-54 years age randomly allocated to either placebo or one Aspirin 325 mg tablet on alternate day. After 5 years, the number of fatal and non-fatal myocardial infarcts was halved in the treated versus the placebo group. Another big win for the simple and cheap Aspirin! However, not all was good news in this trial as there was a small 15% increase in strokes in the treated group which in itself did not achieve statistical significance but the relative ratio of hemorrhagic stroke was certainly increased to about five times that of the placebo group, raising doubts as to safety of prophylactic Aspirin in individuals at risk for hemorrhagic strokes especially those with poorly controlled systemic hypertension.

In summary, to the Cardiologist, Aspirin used alone is a powerful anti-thrombotic agent which is relatively safe, easy to administer and very very cheap besides being almost as effective as the most expensive and potent anti-thrombotic or clot lysing agent available in the world today.

Nature has shown kindness to the poor in the shape of Aspirin!

*Azhar Faruqi,
Editor.*