

So what is the truth about HRT?

In March this year a paper by Professor Robert D. Langer raised some serious questions about the 'facts' that, in the past, have led women and their doctors to believe that HRT is unsafe.

It received few national headlines but *Menopause Matters* sees it as a major development in ensuring women are in possession of accurate information when deciding what treatment is right for them.

We spoke exclusively to Professor Langer about the background to his published report.



Photo courtesy of the BBC and Maramedia.

Professor Robert D. Langer's paper, *The evidence base for HRT: what can we believe?*, is an interesting and welcome review of the 2002 Women's Health Initiative (WHI) clinical trial of hormone replacement therapy (HRT). The study and subsequent report, which emphasised the risks of HRT, caused worldwide concern which led many women to refuse treatment.

In her capacity as chairman of the British Menopause Society (BMS), *Menopause Matters*'s Dr. Heather Currie explained what Langer's revealing report

• **Professor Langer has written extensively about the science.**



means: "This new paper highlights the serious errors that were made during the WHI study and publication of results including little involvement from key investigators and conclusions made that did not accurately reflect the scientific findings. Professor Langer also highlights that the study was designed to test the effects of HRT in older women, yet the conclusions applied the exaggerated risks to all women. Clinicians have been struggling for nearly 15 years to disprove some of the information in the report which was incorrectly deemed as factual. Since then, many women who needed HRT but avoided it, have suffered unnecessarily."

Photo credit: Edgar Nuñez, University of Nevada, Reno School of Medicine.



Why has it taken so long for this to come out and how on earth was this allowed to happen?

Menopause Matters editor, Pam Brook, put these two questions directly to Professor Langer. He also found that, as here in the UK, this positive news around HRT has received little national press in the United States but it has finally revealed what many have known for a long time: "The menopause medicine community has welcomed the scientific content of this paper as a vindication of what many have thought, and the political content as confirmation of what many have suspected.

"Unfortunately, so far the paper has little play in the popular press. But I have heard from a few well-informed women that the paper reinforces their understanding of the strong contrasts between the Conjugated Equine Estrogen (CEE) plus Medroxyprogesterone Acetate (MPA) arm and the CEE-alone arm, helps them to understand the groundswell of negative press that accompanied the initial report, and gives them confidence to discuss details of HRT options with their physicians."

So why publish now?

"It has taken this long," continued Professor Langer, "because, up until now, in my efforts to re-establish a rational context for consideration of HRT I have chosen to take the high road and have written extensively on the science without getting into the political and administrative subtext. But, sadly, that approach has proven ineffective in countering the hugely negative press that resulted from the breast cancer scare triggered by the hyperbole of the initial reports.

"To be clear, the major professional sub-specialty societies have largely come around to a balanced scientific understanding, but the rank and file practitioners and women have not. So, after much soul-searching, in an effort to turn things around so that the new generation of women now entering or approaching menopause worldwide will have appropriate therapeutic options, I have chosen to reveal a bit of the behind-the-scenes story that created the unfortunate fix in which we now find ourselves." *continued page 11 ...* →

"Published online in *Climacteric*, Professor Langer's important revelation puts to rest the incorrect perception of risks of HRT, and also calls into question the publication process."



• Women need to be provided with the correct information to make a decision about what treatment is best for them



An eye-opener

Speaking to *The Guardian*, about the making of her BBC programme, *The Menopause and Me* (see page 17) Kirsty Wark said she learnt a great deal about HRT: "Discovering Heather was on HRT was an absolute eye-opener for me. The US study that prompted me to come off HRT has been considerably revised and HRT only increases the risk of breast cancer if you are already predisposed. I'm back on a small dose of HRT and think I'm starting to see my sleep improve."

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Background

Dr Currie added: “Over recent years, reanalysis of the data and consideration of further research has led to a better understanding of the risks of HRT. Evidence shows that the risks are small and, for most women, are outweighed by the benefits if treatment is started before 60, or within 10 years of the menopause. Benefits include symptom control as well as improved urogenital, bone and cardiovascular health. This is reflected in Professor Langer’s paper, which points out that the WHI study did not show any statistically significant increased risk of breast cancer or heart disease in women using HRT.

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Edward Morris, Vice President for Clinical Quality, for the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists



• **Edward Morris, VP for clinical quality at the RCOG wants to provide women with the correct information about HRT.**

(RCOG), highlighted the extensive work that it and the BMS have been doing to ensure the truth is available to women: “The RCOG and BMS have worked hard over recent years to provide women with the correct information about HRT to make a properly informed decision.

“In 2016, the BMS and Women’s Health Concern published updated recommendations on HRT in menopausal women, while last month the RCOG launched an information hub about menopause and women’s health later in life. NICE’s guideline on Menopause: diagnosis and management has also significantly helped both women and clinicians in understanding the evidence behind the advice we provide.

“While not every woman requires HRT, all should have access to accurate information about the consequences of menopause and treatment options, and the reassurance that HRT remains a low risk and beneficial treatment for most women.”

EDITOR, PAM BROOK COMMENTED:



“It was Oscar Wilde who said ‘*The truth is rarely pure and never simple*,’ John Lennon who added: ‘*The more I see, the less I know for sure.*’

“How we see things, what we value and what we believe are determined by numerous influences from cradle to grave. Today’s world seems to demand instant, absolute answers, adding a layer of complexity. However, if we can learn from the past it is surely that what we may have believed at one time is no longer the truth today. After all what was once seen as witchcraft is now mainstream medicine!

“Professor Langer is to be congratulated for putting his head above the parapet and questioning the process by which earlier conclusions were reached. As he said, it is time to get past misinformation and hysteria and stop denying women, who have indications, the potential benefits of taking HRT.

