

New study results herald improved future treatment

The results of a large international breast cancer clinical trial were announced in December in the US.

The ATAC study's results received considerable attention in the media. One could be excused for believing that, as a result of the study, tamoxifen will no longer be used for treating women with breast cancer. This is, however, not the case.

The trial recruited almost 10,000 postmenopausal women with early breast cancer post surgery randomly divided to receive one of 3 treatment arms:

- arimidex (also known as Anastrozole)
- tamoxifen
- combination of arimidex and tamoxifen

The ATAC Study was set up to answer the following questions regarding optimal treatment:

- Is arimidex as effective/more effective than tamoxifen in postmenopausal women with early breast cancer?
- Does arimidex offer any safety benefits over tamoxifen in this patient group?
- Could a combination of arimidex and tamoxifen offer additional benefits over tamoxifen alone?

The study also looked at some additional aspects through 4 sub-group studies – effects on bones, changes to endometrium (lining of the womb), quality of life and drug interaction. Complete results of these sub-group studies will be announced later this year.

Many *Beacon* readers will have taken, or are presently taking, tamoxifen as part of their adjuvant treatment for breast cancer. Previous trials have revealed that tamoxifen is effective in reducing recurrence, making it an important pharmaceutical for thousands of women with breast cancer. Unfortunately, as with all medications, there is a down side. In this case, we know that tamoxifen can have side effects, the most serious being an increased risk of endometrial cancer and thrombosis. Whilst this may be a small increase in risk, it certainly makes sense that we work to find newer treatments that optimize the benefits whilst reducing the risks.

The ATAC Study revealed the following:

- After an average of 33 months' follow-up the numbers of women who relapsed or died in each of the 3 groups were:
317 out of 3125 taking arimidex
379 out of 3116 taking tamoxifen
383 out of 3125 taking the combination

- Overall there were less ‘adverse events’ experienced by the group taking arimidex; these included endometrial cancers, deep vein thromboses, vaginal bleeding, hot flushes and weight gain.
- Women taking tamoxifen experienced less fractures and less joint pain.
- The combination of arimidex and tamoxifen gave very similar results to the tamoxifen alone group, showing there was no additional benefit from taking the two in combination.

Arimidex is presently available on the PBS for Australian women with advanced breast cancer, and now that these results are available, Astra Zeneca, the company which produces arimidex, will apply to have it made available for women with early breast cancer.

Even with the smoothest of passages through the system though, arimidex will not be available for these women for at least another year.

The other thing which is important to note is that these trials were conducted with women who’d received no other hormone treatment. There is no evidence, yet anyhow, that shows that women presently on tamoxifen will benefit from arimidex once it becomes readily available.

What it does show us, however, is that the researchers working on improved treatments which hopefully will benefit women with breast cancer in the future.