

May 4, 2009

Bioidenticals in the news

By *KIM MULFORD*
Courier-Post Staff

When Janice Halscheid of Woolwich entered menopause a few years ago, she didn't feel like herself. She calls it her "depression period."

"I felt like, ugh," said Halscheid, who works as a Realtor for Remax in Mullica Hill. "I didn't want to do anything. Something wasn't right."

A cousin urged her to read Suzanne Somers' book, "The Sexy Years," and recommended she try bioidentical hormones, an alternative treatment which recently received rave reviews from Oprah Winfrey.

Halscheid went to Dr. Allan Magaziner, an osteopathic doctor who founded the Magaziner Center for Wellness in Cherry Hill. After measuring her hormone levels using blood and urine tests, he prescribed a hormone regimen tailored to her needs.

She balked at first, but agreed to try it after he explained that bioidentical hormones are chemically identical to the ones produced in the human body. The prescriptions -- an estradiol cream and a natural progesterone cream -- were made to order at a local compounding pharmacy.

The results were beyond her expectations.

"Honest to God, in a matter of two days, I woke up feeling so good," said Halscheid, 63. "I've got plenty of energy; I can sleep; I'm not depressed; I feel great."

In recent years, custom-compounded bioidentical hormone therapy has gained popularity as an alternative treatment for the changes brought on by menopause.

The North American Menopause Society and the Food and Drug Administration both warn there may be potential harm from the therapy. Other major medical societies have expressed serious concerns about the products.

"There has been a clear lack of medical evidence supporting either the efficacy or safety claims of these 'individualized' prescription drugs," warns the North American Menopause Society on its Web site, www.menopause.org.

But Magaziner argues there are studies supporting the kind of therapy he has recommended for perhaps 3,000 women over the last 23 years. He believes the warnings are political and perhaps motivated by other factors.

"I think a lot of the criticism is unfounded," Magaziner said during a phone interview.

There are no questions in his mind that bioidentical hormone therapy is better than traditional synthetic hormone treatments. He said the topical treatments he recommends are not associated

with the same risks as oral estrogen; in fact, he said, studies have shown they lower the risk of breast cancer and have positive effects on the body.

"When used properly, I find (bioidentical hormones) are very safe and very effective," Magaziner said.

Dr. Eric Grossman, an obstetrician/gynecologist in Voorhees, said he can prescribe plant-based "bioidentical" estrogens which are FDA-approved. But he has concerns about anything that hasn't been rigorously studied, including custom-compounded medications, herbal supplements and over-the-counter treatments.

"One of the biggest concerns I have is that they don't necessarily spell out the risks that they have," said Grossman. "Because it's not FDA-approved, you potentially could have more risks, but you just don't know that."

Halscheid decided the benefits outweighed the risks. Because the treatments are considered experimental, her health insurance doesn't cover the cost of her medication, which costs \$155 a month. It also doesn't cover the tests or her visits with Magaziner.

For her, it's all worth it because the therapy has improved her quality of life.

"It was unbelievable," said Halscheid. "I feel 20 years younger."

Reach Kim Mulford at (856) 486-2448 or kmulford@courierpostonline.com