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Unusual Heart Therapy Wins Coverage From Large Insurer

By MOLLY O'NEILL

In a move that could be a boon to alternative medicine, the nation's largest provider of health insurance for individuals announced yesterday that it would reimburse patients participating in a program that combines diet, meditation, exercise and support groups to reverse heart disease.

The "reversal program," which was developed by Dr. Dean Ornish, director of the Preventive Medicine Research Institute in Sausalito, Calif., is the first non-surgical, non-pharmaceutical therapy for heart disease to qualify for insurance reimbursement, which it was granted yesterday by the Mutual of Omaha Insurance Company.

With the exception of chiropractic care, it is the first alternative medical technique, not taught in traditional medical school curriculums, to gain approval by a major insurance carrier. Insurance executives say it will not be the last.

'Very Hot Area'

"Alternative therapies are potentially a very hot area," said Dr. Jeffrey Weiner, senior medical director of U.S. Healthcare, a health-maintenance organization with 1.6 million subscribers, based in Blue Bell, Pa.

Other insurance companies may soon follow Mutual of Omaha's lead. The Blue Cross and Blue Shield Companies of California are "considering

Dr. Ornish's plan quite positively and will make a final decision about reimbursement at our next meeting," said Mike Odom, a company spokesman. Similar therapies are being considered for inclusion in the national health-care policy being developed by the White House, according to several physicians who are working with the White House and who asked not to be identified.

Dr. Joseph J. Jacobs, director of alternative medicine at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Md., said, "I think it's terrific that insurance companies are beginning to acknowledge the value of therapies outside conventional forms." He added that non-traditional therapies could be effective in dealing with chronic problems like heart disease, repetitive stress syndrome, arthritis and back pain and that they were often much less expensive than conventional treatment.

Dr. Ornish's reversal plan, for instance, costs \$3,500 a year, about one-tenth the price of conventional coronary care, according to Dr. Richard Collins, director of cardiology at the Immanuel Medical Center in Omaha. Immanuel Medical Center plans to be-

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Insurer Covers an Unusual Heart Therapy

gin offering a reversal program in October; other hospitals offering the program are Beth Israel Medical Center in Manhattan and Griffin Hospital of Yale University in Derby, Conn.

Patients on Dr. Ornish's program eat a vegetarian diet that gets 10 percent of its calories from fat, practice stress management through meditation and yoga, exercise moderately and participate in a support group to help them adhere to these life style changes.

Jack Weckly, the president of Mutual of Omaha, said that Dr. Ornish's program "is a model for the preventive treatments that are critical for better quality, more economical health care." The company provides health insurance for 10 million people nationwide through individual and group plans.

Dr. William C. Roberts, editor-in-chief of The American Journal of Cardiology in Dallas, agreed. "Americans spent \$18 billion dollars last year on coronary-bypass surgery, making it the number-one health bill in the nation," he said. He added that while traditional therapies could retard heart disease, they have not been shown to reverse it.

"More often than not, the patient's cholesterol actually goes up after the traditional interventions," he said. The American Heart Association estimates that if work loss is added to the cost of hospital, surgical and pharmacological intervention, heart disease costs the United States about \$117.4 billion a year.

Support From Studies

In three studies financed by private foundations as well as by the National Institutes of Health over a 17-year period, Dr. Ornish has proved that his program not only retards but can reverse heart disease. "In the first year, 82 percent of patients demonstrated overall reversal of coronary artery disease," he said.

Dr. Ornish says his program is an adjunct to traditional therapies, not a



Ed Kasht
Dr. Dean Ornish, developer of plan for reversing heart disease.

Some see a foot in the door for alternative medicine.

icated on rigorous, well-designed clinical research, according to Dr. Jacobs of the N.I.H. "In order to validate therapies outside the traditional forms, the researcher has to lay a solid groundwork," Dr. Jacobs said.

In addition to his research, Dr. Ornish has written two best-selling books, "Dr. Dean Ornish's Program for Reversing Heart Disease," (Random House, 1990) and "Eat More, Weigh Less," (HarperCollins, 1993). He has also developed a line of frozen vegetarian meals called Life Choice, which is distributed by direct mail through Conagra Inc. based in Omaha.

Promoting a Message

Dr. Ornish said: "It is very threatening to ask people to change what they put in their mouths 21 times a week and to ask them to practice activities that are outside their realm. I figured the more familiar my name became, the less threatening my message would be."

But it may still be threatening to conventionally trained cardiologists. Dr. Roberts said, "It's tough to make a living passing out eating advice." Like conventional heart specialists, Dr. Ornish prescribes heart medicine, but he does not recommend cholesterol-lowering medication for people following his program.

Dr. Ornish's detractors, such as Dr. Adam Drenowski, dean of nutrition at the University of Michigan School of Public Health in Ann Arbor, question whether adherence to a stringent low-fat diet is feasible. "My research has shown that, unless threatened by death, adherence is impossible," Dr.

Drenowski said in an interview last winter.

Others, like Dr. Peter Kaufman, director of behavioral medicine at the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute in Bethesda, say that pulling alternative treatments into mainstream medical practice requires some retraining.

"We are in the early stages of using alternative interventions that rely on behavioral changes in health care," he said. Mutual of Omaha, he said, "is also helping to shape the practice of behavioral medicine, which is in its infancy."

By opening the door to other forms of preventive treatment, insurance reimbursement for the reversal program is also the first step toward changing the way medicine is practiced in the United States, said Dr. Collins of Immanuel Medical Center. "Physicians have become procedure-providers instead of health-care providers," he said. "That's where the money has been."

Dr. Collins plans to do his part to change that when he opens his reversal center in October, using Dr. Ornish's procedures. "We're promising a money-back guarantee," he said. "If reversal doesn't work, we'll deduct its cost from any additional procedure the patient might require."