A Fix For Failing Hearts

Is a new drug called BiDil a lifesaver—or a new form of racial profiling?

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Heart disease—high cholesterol, high blood pressure, strokes and heart failure—is the number one killer of African Americans. So when data showed that BiDil, a heart drug dismissed as a failure in the general population, was actually remarkably successful in blacks, researchers decided to take a closer look.

The African-American Heart Failure Trial (A-HeFT), the first of its kind, found that BiDil increased survival rates by 43 percent, decreased first hospitalizations by 33 percent and markedly improved the quality of life of patients. Now the FDA is considering approving BiDil for use only in black patients—a medical first.

Some critics say BiDil's approval could promote the potentially racist view that ethnic groups are biologically different; others cite the difficulty, in a multiracial society, of identifying who is "black." Moreover, drugs don't address the environmental and economic factors that put blacks at higher risk. But Anne L. Taylor, MD, lead researcher of A-HeFT, argues that there are valid differences in the ways ethnic groups respond to medicine (for example, blacks metabolize antidepressants slower than whites). "We are saving lives," she says.

BiDil is a combination of two drugs currently used to treat various heart conditions. In blacks, however, they maintain levels of nitric oxide, a chemical compound that causes blood vessels to dilate, resulting in lower blood pressure (studies suggest that we have lower levels of nitric oxide). If approved, BiDil will be available by prescription (side effects include dizziness and headaches). For more information, talk to your doctor or visit www.nitromed.com.—*Rozalynn S. Frazier*

QUICK TIP: To lower your risk for heart disease, watch salt, saturated-fat and cholesterol intake; exercise; stop smoking; reduce your alcohol intake; and have your doctor regularly check your blood pressure.

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