



# The holistic way to a healthy Profit

Are private laboratories leading patients a merry dance on the subject of food allergy? Jon Garvey looked into the activities of two outfits and found that, at best, their claims were dubious.

**F**OOD allergy has become one of the most fertile areas of medical attention, linked as it is in the public eye with the subconscious fear that modern ways of life are doing harm. Some doctors consider the whole thing bunkum, a few have become true believers in the clinical ecology gospel, and many in the middle have been more ready to consider food intolerance as a diagnosis, and perhaps refer to others for tests. So, a plethora of private laboratories and clinics has grown up.

One such, which supposedly detects allergy from hair samples, is Allergy Advisory Services, of Bridgwater, Somerset (see panel overleaf). This outfit is run by a couple who would seem to be making a tidy profit out of diagnostic telepathy. But, while looking into that, I found that one of my patients, as well as sending some of her hair for allergy testing, had provided another laboratory with a blood sample. Inquiries showed that the blood technique, though it too raised questions, was being marketed on a much more commercial scale. (Incidentally, the results of her blood and hair tests showed next to no correlation.)

The blood tests are done at Larkhall Laboratories, in Putney. This is also the headquarters of a

small group of companies specialising in all sorts of nutritional tests, literature on cancer cures, allergy, mineral deficiencies and megavitamin therapy, in mechanical sexual aids and, surprise, surprise, in the manufacture and marketing of a range of low-allergen foods, and mineral and vitamin supplements. The parent firm, Cantassium Company, has its gluten-and wheat-free products in MIMS, though they are prescribable only for gluten enteropathy, dermatitis herpetiformis and coeliac disease.

I became a little suspicious when my patient came to ask for a prescription for Trufree flour because of the allergy detected by her blood test. She had, she said, been asked by the laboratory to approach her doctor for this in view of its expense, though she had not been told that they themselves manufactured it.

## Cytotoxic test

I wrote to Larkhall, reminding them that to prescribe borderline substances for non-recognised conditions would render me liable for reimbursing the NHS, and received a reply denying that the patient was given the product from us, though suggesting that some doctors "bend the rules". It is hard to understand where else our patient got the idea, but I had to accept their denial.

As to the test itself, it is said to be a "cytotoxic test" in which the patient's live blood cells are exposed to a range of foods, and the degree of cell damage noted microscopically in four grades

from negative to total destruction. The test has to be done within six hours of taking the blood sample, so in most cases this must be done at the laboratory at an extra cost of £5.

The cost of the test depends on how many foods are tested, but ranges from £45 for 48 foods to £135 for 144. As the foods are in standard groups and all the groups are likely to contain at least some foods a particular patient eats, you will have to save up for a comprehensive result. One is told to avoid all foods showing positive on the test, and to take all others on a four-day rotating plan to prevent further allergies. Fortunately, any vitamin or mineral deficiencies from this can be corrected by Larkhall's own products.

Not wishing to be overcritical, I asked Larkhall for any scientific evidence that the test meant anything, and why, if cytotoxic reactions to food were so common, there were not epidemics of haemolytic anaemia and catastrophic platelet aggregation. As I received no reply it was not, embarrassingly, until *World Medicine* had forwarded the first draft of this article to Larkhall for comment that I learnt their answers — it seems their letter and references had got lost in the post.

Dr Peter Fennell, in charge of the laboratory, gave a helpful and frank reply, with technical details of the test, and modestly commented that one should remember that "the cytotoxic test is only a pointer which indicates which foods to try out on an



elimination diet. The latter is still the only true guide to masked food allergy."

Dr Fennell also stated that "cytotoxic reactions to food do appear to be a common finding in vitro, though in vivo studies have yet to take place". This certainly appears to be the case from reprints which were sent with the letter. One, for example, investigates the reproducibility of the test and several factors affecting it, but makes no attempt to correlate it with patients' complaints. Its authors state that the "definite significance of the cytotoxic test in the diagnosis of food allergy has yet to be elucidated". I would offer to help Larkhall in research to validate the test, but they appear not to mind too much, saying unequivocally in their explanatory literature to clients that "if you react at any level you should avoid that particular food".

"The research paper says that "the test usually gives negative results in so-called fixed food allergy". But Larkhall tell patients that "if... the food [which reacted] is a 'fixed' allergy then you are destined to do without that food permanently".

#### Information sheet

Another paper<sup>2</sup> uses the test as a basis for validating another measure of allergic activity, but gives no evidence for correlation between the test and elimination diet results, contenting itself by saying that the test "in most subjects gives reliable responses, revealing among the positive foods many which were consistent with their clinical complaints". Yet even such woolly researchers accept that "the method needs further study in concert with the advancements in basic immunochemical research". Larkhall, though, use it to advise anyone who will pay the fee.

A third paper,<sup>3</sup> enthusiastic about the test in the tight hands, admits that it "presents the risk of subjectivity of interpretation and lacks simple standardisation

## Hair-raising diagnoses

Allergy Advisory Services claims to assess food allergies from hair samples. Several patients in our practice sent their half-teaspoon sized hair-sample plus £8 and came to us with the results for our comments, or to ask for prescriptions for soya-milk or gluten-free products.

I found it hard to believe that keratin had much in the way of immune properties, so I decided to make inquiries. I asked the laboratory about the tests performed, the research on which they were based, the means of validating results, the controls used, and the rate of false positive and negative results.

Mrs W. E. Simmonds informed me that they use radionic instruments to assess allergic responses, and that a number of other doctors and clinics send hair samples regularly. She said that in eight years they had "hardly ever" found that their recommended diets were incorrect.

That was not quite the information I had asked for, but it did tell me the scientific basis for their tests—radionic instruments:

- "Radionics is the science of radiation detection which uses the extrasensory perception of the operator and automatic instruments..."<sup>1</sup>
- "Today, most if not all radionic practitioners would agree that it is their belief that man does have what is referred to as an etheric body."<sup>2</sup>
- "[Radionics] uses as its instrument a "box" containing a number of dials in a particular sequence or pattern."<sup>3</sup>

Well, perhaps a little more esoteric than you had thought—dowsing for allergy. In fact, it would quite disturb some patients, who might regard divination as something in which they ought not to get involved. But where's the harm in it, if patients are being helped?

Ah, but how does one find out how many patients are actually helped? Mrs Simmonds was not forthcoming about any controlled trials.

I forwarded two hair samples from myself and two from my wife, under different

and quality control". More important, it stresses that detailed patient education is mandatory or the whole management programme is doomed—"follow-up by a well-trained assistant is essential". Larkhall, on their sheet, suggest seeking trained help if embarking on any radical changes of diet, but this is hardly the same thing.

This paper is used as a reference in another Larkhall information sheet to support its claim that the test can benefit sufferers from a number of vague complaints. In fact, the paper refers to ENT allergy sufferers, but notes in passing that some patients were relieved of other symptoms. These range from about a third of those suffering with fatigue, to only 2 per cent of those with palpitations — not an impressive result, though an interesting one, and not consistent with Larkhall's claim that "the patient is likely to obtain marked relief from his/her symptoms". In fact, in the study, even those whose ENT symptoms improved still, in most cases, needed to continue their nasal sprays.

Dr Fennell expressed surprise in his letter that I mentioned haemolytic anaemia and platelet aggregation, since, he said, only granulocytes are affected by the test. But can I be blamed for believing his own handout to patients, in which a mild reaction is said to cause "platelet aggregation", and a marked one to cause 'severe damage to white cells and some damage to red cells'? Anyone reading that would fear for his life whenever he ate lunch! He would certainly stop eating any foods which showed positive (and even non-sufferers, as Dr Fennell told me but omitted from the patient brief, show at least one to two reactions in each group of 48 foods), and so would feel in need of another test offered by Larkhall. This is the Nutritest (cost £15), which is a 245 point questionnaire on your health. When completed, it is marked by a computer to tell you what you lack in the way of vitamins and minerals, which can all, praise be, be supplied by Larkhall/Cantassium.

#### Other services

names, to be processed. Neither of us suffers from any known condition (apart from overwork and my Gilbert's disease) so, by way of testing the safety of the laboratory (as it is used largely by people independently of their doctors), I invented a list of symptoms which would suggest to any half-trained naturopath that we were suffering, in two of the cases, from angina and cardiac dysrhythmia, and in the others, from bleeding peptic ulcer.

Mrs Simmonds did not see fit to advise us to seek any medical help, but did inform us of the things to which we were allergic. For me, it was milk, including tinned milk, dried milk, butter, cheese, yoghurt and even goat's milk, eggs and chicken. Duck, goose (to which allergen I have never been exposed) and turkey would poison me if I had them more than once in five days. At least, they would if I went under the name of "M. E. Ventham". If I called myself after a friend's wife, I would lose my allergy to dried milk and yoghurt, and acquire one to potato.

My wife, as Mrs Sarah Monk, was allergic to the same milk products as Mr Ventham, but not for some reason yoghurt, and also suffered evil consequences from grapes, raisins and wine. Under her father's name, however, all these life-threateners disappeared, and she miraculously became sensitive to wheat, oats, barley, rye and gluten.

It is not an offence to diagnose a condition which does not exist, nor offer a treatment which will cure it. But the Allergy Advisory Service does not do what it purports to do—test for food allergy. If patients knew how it was determined that they should change their diets, fewer would part with their money. And part with it they do. For, by Mrs Simmonds' admission, they do enough tests to make an income of £20,000 a year. And no night calls!

#### REFERENCES

1. Copen, B. (1969). *Radionic Computer Handbook*.
2. Tansley, D. V. (1972). *Radionics and the Subtle Anatomy of Man*.
3. Graves, T. (1976). *Dowsing*.

The test asks such questions as "Can you see well in dim light?" or "Does bright light cause discomfort?" Reading the blurb makes it clear that all the compilers have done is to gather every sign and symptom of nutritional deficiency from the literature and use it as a diagnostic marker in the questionnaire. Well, can you see well in dim light? No? Nutritest will tell you why. Larkhall also offer a test to do a nutritional breakdown on your daily fare for £13, and to advise you on your correct weight and food intake for your height for £20.

Once you have discovered your dietary problems, bought your Trufree Bread Mix at £2.30 per lb, your vitamin and mineral supplements at £5.20 for 60 (according to the price list they sent me on application) and so on, you may at last relax with a good book, thoughtfully published by Roberts Publications, another Cantassium subsidiary. You could read *Eye Nutrition*, *Face Lifting by Exercise*, *Live to be a Hundred*.

Dr Robert Woodward, director of the Cantassium/Larkhall organisation, took exception to any

suggestion that they were out to rook patients, saying that the profits on holistic products are "negligible". Perhaps that is why they need to promote their products by expensive and clinically unsubstantiated tests, while giving the impression to self-referred clients that they are routine and definitive. He asked that I should not lose sight of the fact that their main intention is to help people to be healthy.

Well, if it really is just altruism, I'm all for it—that is why I look for, and sometimes find, food allergy in my own patients. But I don't charge £135 to do it, and I try to remain aware that many symptoms are not allergic.

#### How to ruin the NHS

Are there any general lessons to be drawn from the activities of Larkhall Laboratories and Allergy Advisory Services? It could be that I have picked on two rogues

among a multitude of genuine, and qualified, healers. It could be, but how do you tell the difference?

Allergy Advisory Services, for instance, could challenge my own, or my wife's, lack of symptoms by their statement that "many people have food sensitivity that they are not aware of, and which is not causing any obvious symptoms of ill health". Or they could quote the radionic doctrine that "any potency of the lower order may be chemically analysed, but the higher potencies are non-analytic by the orthodox system, but are by the radionic system".<sup>4</sup> That is, if the alternative system does not correspond with reality, as perceived by normal physical laws, then reality is wrong. Dare I suggest that the same process is used by acupuncturists with their meridians, or homoeopaths with their infinite dilutions?

There is an almost indecent scramble at present to accommodate alternative therapies and even to make them available under the NHS. But this often denotes an "Emperor's new clothes" mentality in which everyone is afraid to call rubbish by its name for fear of being regarded as reactionary. We need to apply more of our critical faculties, lest in bringing these ideas into the NHS, we make it rapidly bankrupt.

#### REFERENCES

1. Holopainen, E. *et al* (1980). *Acta Otolaryngol.* 89, 222.
2. Ulett, G. A. *et al* (1974). *Annals of Allergy* 33, 23.
3. Boyles, J. H. (1977). *Ear, Nose, Throat J.* 56, 168.
4. Copen, B. (1969). *Radionic Computer Handbook*.

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**Dr Robert Woodward, a director of Larkhall Laboratories invited for his comments, told World Medicine:**

I do not like the innuendo of Dr Garvey's article. I presume that Dr Garvey works for nothing in his practice, since I have always considered salaries to be 100 per cent profit because we are all basically worthless. Perhaps Dr Garvey has an inflated idea of his value!

*The Lancet* (October 15, p865) has a paper "Is Migraine Food Allergy?" which suggests that antibodies were not found to all foods and masked allergy reactions were indicated. It would seem that although the cytotoxic test may be controversial it has something to contribute. A little humility would go a long way, especially with people like Dr Garvey. I can assure you that Dr Fennell and I would not be wasting our time if we did not believe that there was something useful in all this holistic stuff.