

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Is menopausal hormone therapy still a modern social issue? Women's experience in a northern Italian city

Endocrine tumult of the menopause can be associated with many clinical manifestations, with the risk of long-term consequences. Hormone therapy (HT) consists in the administration of estrogen, alone or with progestin, to relieve these uncomfortable disturbs and to prevent the onset of other comorbidities. However, the history of HT was not linear. After a successful period in the 20th century, general attitude changed after the Women's Health Initiative (WHI), the first large-scale research on its collateral effects. The WHI study, published in 2002, raised concerns about HT and health risks in postmenopausal users older than 60 years old and/or women who have been postmenopausal for more than 10 years, with an increased risk of fatal breast cancer. The conclusion had wide resonance, although it was based on an inaccurate methodological enrollment. These results caused widespread distrust in HT, with a dramatic drop in its prescription in the following years. Subsequent reanalysis of the data of the WHI study induced the elaboration of less catastrophic conclusions, describing a trend with two peaks of use: a first in the 1960s and a second in the years 1999-2000. After, there was a precipitous decline in HT use in many countries, and this rate of utilization persists nowadays.

Given the possible beneficial impact of HT on patients' quality of life, we conducted a pilot population survey on a random sample of 126 women of 50-59 years of age in an industrial city in the north of Italy: most of participants were Caucasian and in menopause. Part of our initial data indicates that the starting average age of assumption was 49.1 years. The 41.7% of the users affirmed to be satisfied with HT. The 23.5% of women had been reported being ideally against the use of replacement hormones, the 8.6% of doctors recommended them not using HT, and the 2.5% did not use due to the fear of side effects. A significant number of women known about HT from the media and not by a health professional.

Only few longitudinal studies have investigated the prevalence of HT use in menopause during the last decades. In Italy, between 1999 and 2001, about 7% of

menopausal women used HT. In our survey, the proportion of women who used HT (11.9% in total, only 3% at the time of the study) was comparable to the other Western industrialized countries.

As highlighted by our data, many factors seem to still affect HT usage as: place of residence, age, occupation, possession of health insurance, reference hospital, concerns about side effects, overall knowledge about HT, and partner's job. Our preliminary results highlight the need for more information about HT among both patients and health professionals, along with the need of more accurate medical evaluations for a tailored treatment.

Integrated medical practice, with shared experience and knowledge, can also be important for patients experiencing menopause. Doctors have to disseminate medical information about the use of HT, minimizing the impact of possible limitations.¹⁻⁶

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Conflicts of interest

The authors certify that there is no conflict of interest with any financial organization regarding the material discussed in the manuscript.

Authors' contributions

All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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