

Forecasting New Medications' Effect on the High Blood Pressure Front

Statistics can be confusing—and be used on purpose to cause confusion. But Dr. Lemuel Moyé says they are also something else: the truth.

"Statistics tell how real something we think we are seeing really is," he says.

Moyé is a professor at the University of Texas Health Science Center in Houston. He is one of the leading biostatisticians in the country. Biostatisticians are statistics experts who do medical research and work closely with doctors.

Moyé was an important member of the research team that showed high systolic blood pressure increases your risk for heart attack and stroke. Systolic blood pressure is the first, or top, number in a blood pressure reading. So if your blood pressure is 140/90, your systolic blood pressure is 140.

Doctors used to think that it was natural for older people to have a high systolic blood pressure because their arteries got stiffer.

Moyé says, "Just because you are older doesn't mean you don't have to worry about systolic blood pressure."

Moyé grew up in Queens in New York City. He had an interest in keeping track of numbers as a boy. Every day, he carefully recorded the weather—the temperature, humidity, and barometric pressure.

After majoring in math in college, Moyé graduated from medical school and saw patients. But medical research, especially when it involved numbers, was his true love.



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High Blood Pressure: The Science Inside

The type of research that Moyé does is called a clinical trial. Many of the medical studies you hear about are clinical trials. They are done to test whether a new medication is safe and effective.

In a typical clinical trial, the researchers give half of the people who volunteered to be in the trial an experimental medication. They give the other half a pill that looks and tastes like the experimental medication but, in reality, contains no medication. This “dummy pill” is called a placebo.

A lot of information is collected during the trial, including information on side effects. After the trial is over, biostatisticians like Moyé analyze that information to see if there are important differences between the people who got the medication and the people who got the placebo.

Objectivity and large numbers of patients are the reasons that clinical trials are so important to medical research, notes Moyé.

He adds, “Physicians are supposed to be exclusively patient oriented. But it is that point of view that blinds them to an objective view of the therapy. Physicians drawing conclusions just from their own experience is fatally flawed. ”

Moyé has slightly high blood pressure. Although he has studied blood pressure medications, his goal is keep his blood pressure under control without any pills. He keeps his weight down, doesn't add salt to his food, and gets his blood pressure checked regularly.

“High blood pressure is like rain on a picnic. Everything about your health is worse with it,” he says.