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DESPERATELY ILL SEEK HELP OVERSEAS FOR STEM CELLS

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Call David Ames a stem-cell expatriate. The successful young lawyer learned in 2003 that a bothersome weakness in his hands and arms was an early symptom of Lou Gehrig's disease. He would be fortunate to live a few years, doctors said, and nothing could save him.

So Mr. Ames sold his home and his cars and moved to Argentina. There, for more than \$100,000, a doctor is giving him a yearlong experimental course of treatment using his own stem cells.

Mr. Ames is one of an expanding corps of Americans afflicted by devastating diseases whose hopes have been raised by talk of stem-cell advances. Now, a growing number of them are traveling to places such as Mexico, Portugal, China and the Caribbean in search of cures.

There is a simple reason these treatments aren't offered in the U.S.:

There is no evidence they work. Experts say the growing phenomenon of stem-cell tourists is a troubling side effect of the buzz about scientific breakthroughs and the political controversy over the Bush administration's limits on research involving some types of stem cells.

In reality, scientists have only started to understand the potential of stem cells, which are multipurpose cells with the ability to form or regenerate tissue. Stephen Barrett, a retired psychiatrist who tracks scientific frauds on his Web site, Quackwatch.org, isn't surprised that people already are offering miracle stem-cell cures. "It's a general characteristic that quackery stands in the shadow of science," he says.

Mr. Ames is pinning his hopes on doctors at the Regina Mater clinic in Buenos Aires, who drew stem cells from his hip bone three weeks ago. His doctor, Gustavo Moviglia, says he is turning the marrow stem cells into new nerves for Mr. Ames. He also says that he has treated five patients so far and that "they've had improvement in the symptoms."

These are precisely the words desperate patients want to hear. But where is the proof? Studies in animals suggesting bone marrow can morph into nerve cells remain highly preliminary. And "there is no published data to indicate there is an

effect in patients," says Lucie Bruijn, science director of the ALS Association in Los Angeles.

Dr. Moviglia, who, according to the National Library of Medicine, last published a scientific article in 1995, says the procedure is based on his own unpublished discoveries. Experts in the U.S. are skeptical.

"There is nothing other than a guy down there saying he has treated people," says Jeffrey Rothstein, director of the Robert Packard Center for ALS research at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

Desperately ill patients learn about the overseas treatments from "alternative" doctors or the Internet. Right now, patient Web sites are abuzz about a doctor at Chaoyang Hospital in Beijing. He has transplanted nerve cells from aborted human fetuses into the spinal cords of more than 400 people, including a dozen Americans with spinal injuries who paid \$20,000 for the procedure, says Wise Young, a neurologist at Rutgers University who has visited the Chinese center.

American ALS patients also have begun to travel to China, Dr. Young says, and the clinic is "just flooded."

Despite the need for skepticism, though, it isn't necessarily safe to assume that U.S. medical authorities have all the answers. The FDA recently approved two clinical trials of bone-marrow cells to treat heart-attack victims. To avoid regulatory hassles, American doctors carried out the initial research in South America.

Mr. Ames did his best to check out Dr. Moviglia's claims. The Argentinian physician agreed to travel to the U.S. to explain his technique to doctors at the University of California, San Francisco.

Dallas Forshew, the nurse manager at UCSF's ALS clinic, told me the staff was skeptical but didn't want to discourage Mr. Ames. "Hope is a very tricky thing," Ms. Forshew says.

Lou Gehrig's disease, or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, runs its course in a few years. The disease kills off the neurons that connect the spinal cord to a person's arms, legs and muscles for breathing. "In the U.S., I felt that the neurologists had given up," Mr. Ames says.

Frustration has prompted other ALS patients and their families to try other approaches. Project ALS, a group founded by New Yorker Jenifer Estess and her two sisters, has raised millions of dollars to pay for stem-cell research at top institutions such as Johns Hopkins. But progress in the laboratory has been agonizingly slow. "No matter how much money we spend, the science will reveal itself in its own time,"

Ms. Estess said in an interview before her death last December.

Mr. Ames and his family also are doing their best to speed serious research. His father, John Ames, spends hours each day lobbying in support of Proposition 71, a ballot-box measure in California that seeks to raise \$3 billion in state funds for stem-cell science.

Meanwhile, Mr. Ames concedes it hasn't been easy for his family to be in a strange country away from friends. "It's a tough predicament," he says. "But," he adds, "I am not going to sit on my hands. Stem cells will prevail and it will happen. But it won't happen in my lifetime in the U.S."