



IT'S been a while since a finding by medical researchers has sent such a shock wave around the world – not to mention caused South African women to grab their telephones and ask their doctors: what now?

"Doctor, my mother had breast cancer and if these hormone pills are going to give me the disease I'd rather not take them," one menopausal woman told her gynaecologist.

But another patient said her mom had Alzheimer's disease and if hormone replacement therapy (HRT) could spare her this fate she'd gladly continue the treatment – even if it did increase her chances of getting breast cancer.

The findings by the Women's Health Initiative (WHI), a large American government-financed project, worried the researchers themselves so much they called a halt three years before the eight-year-long project was supposed to come to an end.

They told the 16 000 postmenopausal women who were taking part to stop using the pills immediately. Half were taking a combination pill with estrogen and progesterone; the other half were taking placebos.

Among those taking the hormone pill not only did the risk of blood clots double, they experienced 38 per cent more strokes than the women taking the placebos. There were also 23 per cent more cases of heart disease and 26 more cases of breast cancer among the HRT users. Yet the hormone pill also offered those using it 37 per cent more protection against colon cancer and they experienced 33 per cent fewer hip fractures.

For women who've had hysterectomies HRT involves estrogen only. The WHI is continuing a separate project on the long-term effect of estrogen on these women.

In the meantime their research director Dr Jacques Rossouw has dropped a bombshell about the combination pill at an international conference by saying: "A drug that was

meant to be good for women was in fact doing them harm."

THIS isn't the last word in a debate in which medics disagree sharply not only with those with an alternative approach to menopause treatment but also with one another.

"Doctors prescribed HRT because they trusted it would work but now we know it's dangerous for some women," says Dr Christiaan, who writes YOU's sister magazine Huisgenoot's medical column.

He believes the emphasis for high-risk patients will now shift to natural remedies such as isoflavins in soya and red clover.

"No woman with a heightened risk of breast cancer or cardiovascular illness should be taking the combination pill," he says. For safety's sake women should also not take the combination pill for longer than five years after menopause.

Only one pill was tested in the American study. "It doesn't follow all combination pills will cause problems," Dr Christiaan adds.

No responsible doctor would prescribe the same pill for all his patients, says Dr Frans Grobler of the South African Menopause Society. "It's important to treat each patient as an individual."

He says the US research should be placed in perspective. In the first year of HRT there may be a slight increase in heart disease but thereafter estrogen prevents exactly that.

With regard to breast cancer, it's already been proven there's no increase in the first five years of HRT. After that period two in 10 000 more women get breast cancer and after 10 years five more – a small risk for the individual patient.

Interestingly, women who develop breast cancer after long-term treatment with estrogen have a better chance of survival.

Dr Grobler believes women can safely use HRT for longer than five years. A woman who has a

hysterectomy and goes through surgical menopause in her early thirties should be able to enjoy the advantages of HRT for years. The dose can gradually be diminished for older women.

"Doctors don't just treat hearts or breasts but a whole person," Dr Grobler says. "What about the ageing process, sexuality, bone density, bladder problems and hair loss? HRT slows down the general ageing process."

Dr George du Toit, vice-president of the Cancer Association, also questions the American research findings.

"It takes between five and eight years for a healthy woman to develop a significant breast cancer," he says. "That begs the question: could these women's problem not have started before they received HRT?"

The study didn't examine how HRT protects women from Alzheimer's. Other researchers have found the risk of this disease drops by 30 per cent.

"I wouldn't tell every woman to use HRT but I can't deny its advantages to those women whose quality of life could be improved by it," Dr du Toit says.

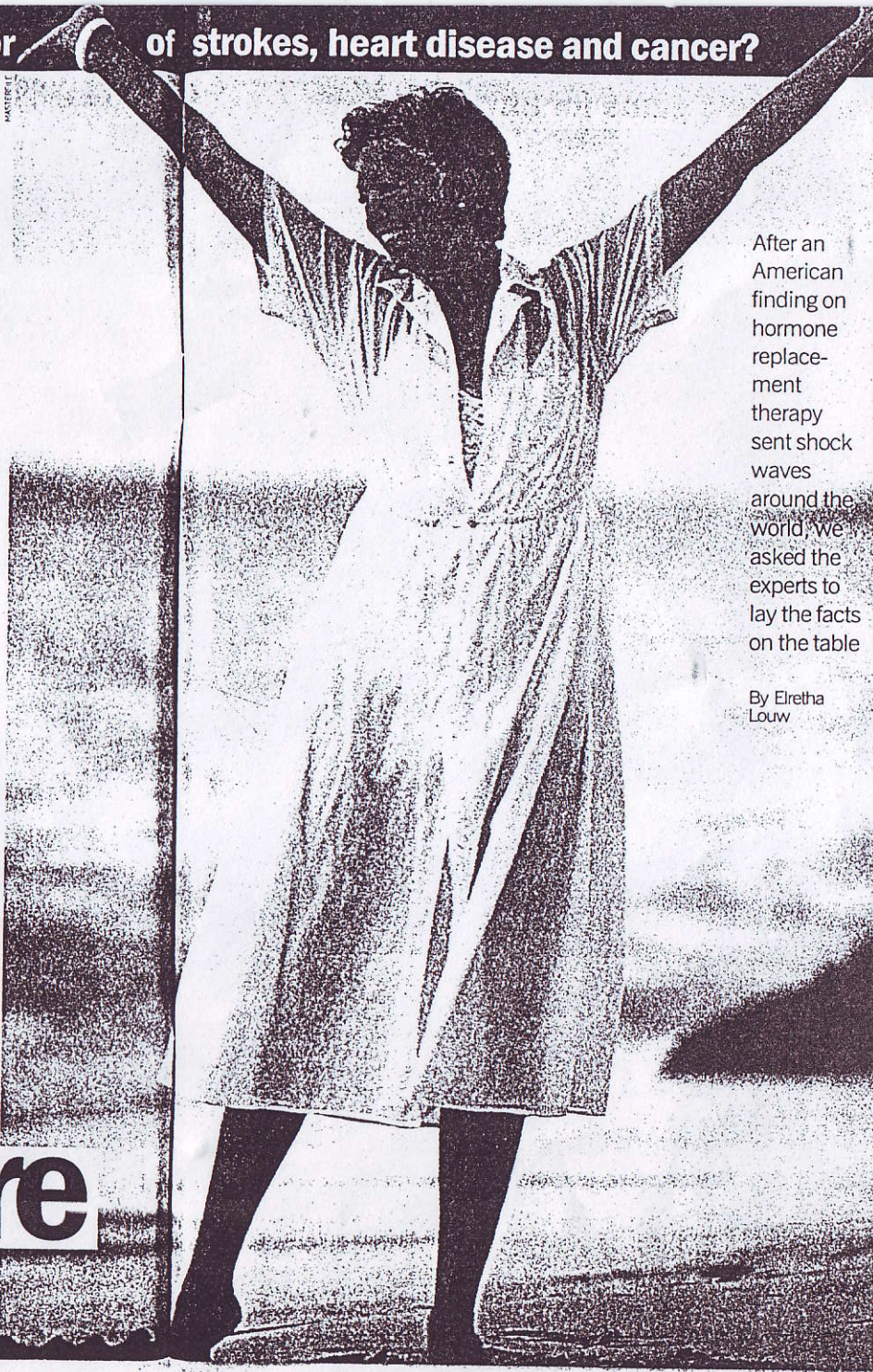
NOT all women find HRT to be the "fountain of youth" it's often said to be.

"I started taking hormones because I was struggling with hot flushes," says Linda*, a fiftysomething Capetonian. "Less than six months later I was for ever cured of HRT!"

Her breasts swelled and her abdomen felt heavy, presumably because her womb had swollen. Instead of being woken by hot flushes she was chased out of bed by her bladder. The fibroids she'd battled with again started causing problems and her periods returned with a vengeance.

"I stopped taking the pills after four months and it took a good two months more before my body felt like my own again. In the process I lost 7 kg without really dieting or exercising."

Side effects such as tender breasts or irregular bleeding cause many



After an American finding on hormone replacement therapy sent shock waves around the world, we asked the experts to lay the facts on the table

By Elretha Louw

women to say no thanks to HRT within the first year. It's been estimated only 38 per cent of menopausal women continue the treatment in America.

When HRT fails it's often the fault of a doctor who prescribes the treatment too early or in the wrong doses, Dr Grobler says. But it's the patient's responsibility to give the doctor feedback.

Annette* was in her fifties when hot flushes started waking her at night. When her gynaecologist prescribed HRT she didn't question it. "Everyone uses it," she says.

Two weeks later one of her eyes started fluttering – the same symptom a friend had had before a light stroke. Annette immediately stopped taking the pills and used homeopathic remedies instead. Her hot flushes disappeared without further side effects.

A menopause formula put together by Allison le Roux, a Cape herbalist trained in homeopathy, diminishes night sweats, hot flushes and mood swings. It's also effective for vaginal dryness, loss of libido and depression.

It's not for people looking for an overnight cure, Alison warns. "It can take longer than HRT to alleviate symptoms and people also have to be prepared to change their diet."

She suggests women cut down on sugar, caffeine, red meat and cigarettes and eat more soya.

Jacqueline Moskovitz, an anti-ageing consultant, recommends "natural hormones" made from yams. Natural estrogen and progesterone are present in cream and, unlike with HRT, are absorbed directly into the bloodstream. Estrogen cream isn't registered here but can be ordered from America over the Internet.

Such over-the-counter remedies have a low estrogen dose and offer only negligible protection for the bones and heart, Dr Grobler warns. Progesterone from yams has no practical value for the heart or bone density but does alleviate symptoms such as hot flushes and mood swings.

Another option for menopausal women is the Pill. "It has a lower hormone dose than HRT and there's no evidence to suggest it holds the same health risks as those now found in the combination pill," Dr Christiaan says.

However, the Pill is safe only for women who don't smoke and aren't overweight. □

* Not their real names.

Hormone scare

– truth about the menopause pill