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September 29, 1999

Patient Dies While Undergoing Gene Therapy

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By **NICHOLAS WADE**

A patient has died while undergoing gene therapy in a trial study at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

If the treatment itself should prove to be the cause of his death it could be a severe setback for gene therapy, an experimental technique whose fulfillment has long fallen short of its high promise.

The patient, Jesse Gelsinger, an 18-year old from Arizona, died on Sept. 17 shortly after receiving a dose of viruses carrying a corrective gene.

Gelsinger, who suffered from a deficiency of ornithine transcarbamylase, a genetic defect that prevents the correct metabolism of ammonia, was part of a group of 18 patients who were being tested with different doses of the therapy. He and another patient, who was unaffected, received the highest dose being given in the trial.

"We voluntarily halted the trial after Jesse's death," said Rebecca Harmon, a spokesperson for the University of Pennsylvania. "We're all devastated by this. Jesse truly was a hero in advancing the cause of science."

Gelsinger's death was first reported in Wednesday's editions of The Washington Post.

Dr. Steve Raper, the principal scientist in charge of the trial, said that the timing of the treatment and Gelsinger's death suggested a possible relationship but that the cause had not yet been determined.

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Adenovirus, the virus used in the study, is a cause of the common cold and usually causes only a mild fever.

More than 230 clinical trials of genetic engineering techniques are now in progress, but most are at a preliminary stage and none has yet led to an approved therapy.

Viruses are both the hope and despair of genetic engineers. Viruses can focus in on specific kinds of cells, penetrate their membranes and insert their genes in working order into the cell's DNA. Most approaches to gene therapy use viruses as the vehicle to convey genes to target cells. The virus' harmful genes are stripped out and a therapeutic gene inserted in their place.

A banner advertisement for Clif Bars. On the left is the Clif logo, which features a stylized figure climbing a rock. To the right of the logo, the text reads "FREE Clif Bars" in large, bold letters. Below this, it says "Buy 1 Box, Get 1 FREE" and "healthshop.com" with a small graphic of a hand holding a Clif Bar. The entire banner is enclosed in a black border.

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