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Vitamin B12 Awareness Week, September 20–26, fights ignorance of an unseen and crippling epidemic

It's a public health crisis that the public doesn't know exists. Millions suffer from it, but few are diagnosed. Its symptoms can look exactly like Alzheimer's disease, depression or multiple sclerosis, so it's routinely misdiagnosed. Left untreated, it can cause permanent, crippling nerve damage—and too many patients don't get treatment until it's too late.

This forgotten disorder is Vitamin B12 deficiency. B12 deficiency is easily detected and easily treated, but the medical profession is largely unaware of the danger, and few patients are screened for it.

Sally M. Pacholok, R.N., and Dr. Jeffrey J. Stuart, authors of the popular and influential book *Could It Be B12? An Epidemic of Misdiagnoses*, are leading a public education campaign which has declared the week of September 20 to September 26, 2009, to be **Vitamin B12 Awareness Week**.

Pacholok and Stuart call on medical professionals, health care institutions and assisted-living residences to observe **Vitamin B12 Awareness Week** by screening all at-risk patients—especially persons age 65 or older—for B12 deficiency.

Vitamin B12 Awareness Week is the culmination of the **Year of B12 Awareness**, a yearlong educational campaign that throughout 2009 has mobilized doctors, other health care professionals, patients and concerned citizens to increase awareness of the dangers of B12 deficiency and the need for testing and treatment.

Pacholok and Stuart believe the hidden epidemic of B12 deficiency can be stopped in its tracks by reeducating the health care community and educating the public.

“This is one of the most preventable and most curable of all medical scourges,” said Pacholok, “but only if we choose to act.”

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Pacholok and Stuart urge the medical community to observe **Vitamin B12 Awareness Week** by:

- Screening at-risk elderly people in assisted living residences, group homes and nursing homes.
- Incorporating screening for B12 deficiency into all fall-prevention programs.
- Screening at-risk pregnant women and nursing mothers.
- Screening infants and children with developmental delays.
- Screening patients diagnosed with neurologic, psychiatric and gastrointestinal disorders.
- Screening patients with anemia.

Pacholok and Stuart are pioneers in alerting the medical profession and the public to the dangers of B12 deficiency. Their 2005 book ***Could It Be B12?*** remains the definitive guide for the general public that fully explains the effects of B12 deficiency and why it is so frequently misdiagnosed.

Kilmer McCully, M.D., the Linus Pauling Award-winning, Harvard-trained pathologist who discovered the connection between heart disease and elevated levels of the amino acid homocysteine, says of ***Could It Be B12?***: “Sally Pacholok, R.N., and Jeffrey Stuart, D.O., are to be congratulated for calling attention to this common disorder that affects a significant proportion of the population, particularly among the elderly. They are correct that deficiency of vitamin B12 is often under-diagnosed and under-treated by the medical profession. I recommend ***Could It Be B12?*** to professionals and patients alike who are interested in finding the underlying cause and cure of many common diseases and conditions related to deficiency of vitamin B12.”

Concerned citizens and people personally touched by B12 deficiency are joining in the **Year of B12 Awareness** campaign to spread the word about the need for B12 deficiency testing and treatment.

For example, Melinda Groover of Birmingham, Alabama, who has a family member who has suffered from misdiagnosed B12 deficiency, has become a B12 awareness activist. Groover has organized a special **B12 Awareness Week** event on September 25 from 6:00 to 9:00 p.m., at Gallery Services, 2901 3rd Avenue South, Birmingham AL 35233. Pacholok and Stuart will give a brief presentation on B12 deficiency and answer questions from the audience. In conjunction with the event at Gallery Services, The Little Professor bookstore (2717 18th St. South, Homewood, AL 35209) will host a book signing for Pacholok and Stuart’s book ***Could It Be B12?*** on September 26 from 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

Pacholok and Stuart have also taken the **Year of B12 Awareness** campaign to the United Kingdom, where **Vitamin B12 Awareness Week** will be observed from October 26 to October 30. The Pernicious Anaemia Society of the United Kingdom (www.Pernicious-Anaemia-Society.org) is leading the British **Year of B12 Awareness** campaign. The Pernicious Anaemia Society is organizing B12 Awareness events in the London area, including planned discussions with members of the British Parliament on the misdiagnosis and undertreatment of patients suffering from B12 deficiency.

Why is B12 so frequently misdiagnosed and untreated?

- Most patients who have B12 deficiency symptoms or are at risk for B12 deficiency never get tested.
- Even doctors who do order serum B12 tests miss many cases of B12 deficiency because they don’t use an additional sensitive test (urinary methylmalonic acid) which is widely available.
- The “normal” cut-off range for serum B12 is too low.
- Misdiagnosis is common because B12 deficiency mimics other diseases.
- Many doctors rarely contemplate B12 deficiency unless red-blood cell abnormalities or anemia—often late signs—are present.
- The elderly are easily misdiagnosed because doctors often blame their symptoms on coexisting medical problems.

More on B12 Deficiency

B12 deficiency causes symptoms such as nerve pain or tingling, dementia, mental illness, tremor and difficulty walking. It is commonly misdiagnosed as Alzheimer's disease, depression, diabetic neuropathy, vertigo and mini-strokes. Major medical journals report that vitamin B12 deficiency occurs in up to 15% of the elderly—approximately 5.4 million seniors. Other studies report the prevalence to be 15% to 25%.

What's more, these numbers only relate to persons 65 and older. They don't include the vast numbers of Americans under the age of 65—some of them infants and children, and millions of them young and middle-aged adults—who become B12 deficient for a variety of reasons. Treating B12 deficiency costs only a few dollars a month and symptoms are often completely reversible if people receive early treatment. If diagnosed late, symptoms such as dementia and nerve injury typically cannot be reversed.

B12 deficiency can mimic multiple sclerosis, chronic fatigue syndrome and post-partum depression/psychosis. It can make men or women infertile and cause developmental disabilities or autistic-like symptoms in children. Other groups of people at high risk for B12 deficiency include vegans, vegetarians, alcoholics and people with celiac disease, Crohn's disease, gastric bypass, anemia, autoimmune diseases and AIDS. The use of certain drugs such as proton pump inhibitors, metformin, H-2 blockers and nitrous oxide can also cause B12 deficiency.

About Sally M. Pacholok and Jeffrey J. Stuart, authors of *Could It Be B12?*

Sally Pacholok has been practicing emergency nursing for 22 years. Jeffrey Stuart, D.O. is board certified in emergency medicine and has been practicing for 16 years. They coauthored the most comprehensive explanation of this problem, *Could It Be B12? An Epidemic of Misdiagnoses* (Quill Driver Books). They have appeared as guests on CNN Headline News *Seeking Solutions with Suzanne*, KATV Channel 7 News in Little Rock, Arkansas and numerous TV shows in southeastern Michigan. Additionally, they have been interviewed by dozens of radio stations including: KSTE Radio's *Sacramento Wide World of Health*, KHNR Honolulu's *Doctors Health Radio*, KKCR BBS Radio's *The Dr. Ann West Show*, and CHOK Radio's *Live with Lee* in Ontario, Canada. *Could It Be B12?* has been featured in *Redbook*, *First Magazine*, *Bottom Line Health*, *Variety*, *Anchorage Times*, *Detroit Free Press*, *South Bend Tribune*, *Lockport Union-Sun and Journal*, *Nursing 2007* and a host of other publications.

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