Miracle claims are being made for a new treatment for rheumatoid arthritis which stops the immune system attacking joints. Prof Jonathan Edwards at University College Hospital in London has found that destroying B-cells has produced dramatic remissions, with huge reductions in pain, other symptoms lasting months as a result of a single treatment with almost zero side-effects. 20 people with severe rheumatoid arthritis were treated, only 2 had no benefit, five had residual pain from previous damage, one took up gardening again for the first time in twenty years.

Rheumatoid arthritis is caused by white cells in the body reacting to tissue in normal joints by mistake, thinking it is a germ to be destroyed. The mistake is made by B-cells which produce antibodies to joints. These stick to joint lining, and encourage other white cells to go in for the kill. The result is inflammation, pain and progressive joint destruction - typical of rheumatoid arthritis. Fortunately this mistake is rare, and after all the B-cells are destroyed the body has to build up a library of germs again from scratch. So unless the person with rheumatoid arthritis is unfortunate enough to have another B-cell mistake, the new B-cells have every chance of developing normally.

The paper published in Rheumatology in November 2000 says that those treated had a selective immune deficiency as a result, but was mild and not a risk to them.

The next step in rheumatoid arthritis treatment will be to try and selectively destroy B-cells with sensitivity to human joints, which would have the same reduction of pain and immobility with even lower risks.

We can expect to see a large number of rheumatoid arthritis research programmes to refine these exciting new treatments. It is possible that we may have a powerful, well-tested treatment or even a "miracle" cure for rheumatoid arthritis within the next decade.

Unfortunately it will not benefit those with osteoarthritis who have an entirely different disease process. All types of arthritic pain benefit however from new-generation anti-inflammatory drugs such as Vioxx and Celebrex.