



Media Advisory

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HCHD Patient First to Undergo Gene Therapy to Fight Recurring Ovarian Cancer, Successfully Completes First Phase of Trial

Linda Kent was stunned when she discovered she had ovarian cancer a few years ago. To make matters worse, her husband was laid off from work and she lost her health insurance shortly after. That's when she turned to the Harris County Hospital District for health care, and where she became the first patient to participate in a landmark study to fight recurring ovarian cancer.

When Kent first learned she had an advanced stage of cancer, she says she was confused. She'd had regular pap smears every year and they were all normal. She thought she was safe. She says she still doesn't understand how doctors could have missed her cancer for so long, allowing it to spread and invade her body.

"It's weird. You'd think that if you had something that kills you, you would feel something," Kent says. "But I never had any symptoms."

It was only Kent's second appointment at the Hospital District's Ben Taub General Hospital when she learned her cancer was back, despite having had surgery and chemotherapy during her first bout with the disease. Her doctor initiated treatment immediately, and it was during one of her chemo sessions at Ben Taub Hospital that Kent was approached about a new study. Only women whose ovarian cancer returned after initial treatment were eligible. She was a perfect candidate. After careful consideration and discussing it with her family, Kent agreed to participate.

"I had no guarantees with this, but I never had any guarantees with chemo, either," Kent says.

The study is being conducted by Dr. Dirk G. Kieback, Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology and team members at Baylor College of Medicine. It uses gene therapy to boost the immune system's ability to fight ovarian cancer.

During a brief hospital stay, gene therapy is administered through a tube catheter directly into the abdominal cavity where the cancerous tumors reside. A special polymer delivers genes to tumor cells, where they are absorbed. Once the cells absorb the genes they begin producing a protein called interleukin-12 that acts as a beacon, stimulating the immune system. White blood cells then begin targeting the protein-producing tumor cells, attacking and destroying them.

Kent is the first patient to reach the end of the trial's first phase, which will help doctors determine the safety and maximum tolerated dose of interleukin-12. During the initial stage, treatment was administered at four weekly sessions. As the study progresses, patients are being treated at gradually increasing dosages.

More than a month after completing the first phase of treatment, Kent's outcome is positive. She did not experience adverse reactions to the medication, and a CAT scan at her first follow-up appointment revealed her cancer had not progressed.

"It is still too early to draw conclusions, but we are excited about the outcome so far," Kieback says. "Can you imagine how different things would be if we learned to contain the spread of cancer? It wouldn't be as scary anymore if we knew it was there, but not growing."

As for Kent, Dr. Kieback will continue monitoring her progress in the upcoming months. She says her experience has been a positive one. She is happy with the services she received at Ben Taub Hospital and is content with her decision to partake in the study, no matter what the outcome is.

"There has to be some type of psychological advantage to this because I feel great. Even if this doesn't save me I hope it at least brings doctors closer to finding a cure."

The Harris County Hospital District is the public healthcare system for the nation's third most populous county. It provides quality care for more than 1.2 million patient visits each year by uninsured, underinsured and injured residents of Harris County, Texas. The Hospital District operates Ben Taub General Hospital, Lyndon B. Johnson General Hospital, Quentin Mease Community Hospital, 12 community health centers, a dental center, seven school-based clinics, 13 homeless shelter clinics and four mobile health units.

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