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# 'I keep having to pinch myself, I feel so lucky' - Irish mother with rare disease begins life-saving treatment



Louise Kelly  
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An Irish mother at the centre of an online fundraising campaign has begun chemotherapy treatment ahead of a stem cell transplant next week that could save her life.

Marina Jordan Killoran (45), who suffers from an incurable auto-immune disease called Systemic Scleroderma, flew to Chicago last month to prepare for the transplant, which is unavailable in Ireland.

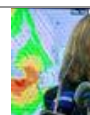
Having raised an incredible €160,000 after a last ditch appeal on independent.ie, the mum-of-two has had her stem cells harvested and cleaned over the last six weeks - ready to be infused back into her body next Monday.

She has just completed the first of five days of treatment in preparation for this life-saving infusion, starting with 11 hours of chemotherapy.

"The chemotherapy suppresses my immune system, it allows my body to kind of act 'normally'," Marina told independent.ie from her hospital bed in Chicago's Northwest

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Memorial Hospital.

"I was very fatigued after the 11 hour treatment and I experienced some nausea but I just feel so humbled and honoured to be here."

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Systemic Scleroderma or "thickened skin" essentially creates an overproduction of protein collagen in the body.

Marina's husband Alan, who is currently by her bedside in Chicago, and their two daughters had almost lost all hope that they would lose her - until they discovered the innovative treatment being pursued by Dr Richard Burt.

"She got her first chemo to suppress her immune system on June 20 and then treated with six days of Neupogen, which is a stimulant to create more stem cells. There was quite a lot of nausea and bone pain," Alan told independent.ie



Marina, Alan and their daughters Shannon and Erin.

Earlier this year, Marina travelled to the US to be assessed for the FDA approved stem cell treatment - which essentially "reboots" the immune system.

Dr Burt was concerned when the couple arrived last month as Marina's condition had deteriorated - and a build up of calcium around her knee was causing her so much pain that she was obliged to use a wheelchair.

After a series of tests, he insisted on being present to personally oversee Marina's treatment and operation - a decision that delayed the process for a further six days. However, the grateful couple are overwhelmed by the medical care Marina is receiving.

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"Everyone is taking really good care of me, they're treating me for the nausea and they are one step ahead all the time," said Marina.

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"Every time they come in with medication, they explain what it is and what it's for. The care is phenomenal. Dr Burt is here all the time, he's incredibly dedicated to his profession. And all the nurses and hospital staff are kind and polite - they can't do enough for us."



*Marina and Alan Killoran at their home in Newbridge Credit: Kyran O'Brien*

Marina's last chemotherapy treatment will be completed on Sunday and her stem cells will be infused back into her body on Monday morning. After that is a "countdown" for at least 12 days while Marina's immune system builds itself back up after "crashing completely".

Despite being away from her daughters Shannon (21) and Erin (16) and going through

such an ordeal, Marina remains optimistic and has already begun to think about how she can "give back" on her return to Ireland.

"At one point the outlook was grim. So for me to be here and to be receiving this treatment in such an amazing hospital with such incredible staff is like a dream. I keep having to pinch myself," Marina said.

"I can't wait to help other people that are in a similar situation to me - that need to receive therapy that is not available in Ireland. I want to be able to give them the information that they need and help them the way I've been helped by the Irish people."

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