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MS Breakthrough: A Standard Cancer Treatment Is Helping Patients Walk Again

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HEALTH



Shelley Hazen

British multiple sclerosis (MS) patient Steven Storey was diagnosed with the disease in 2013 and, within a year, transformed from a marathoner into a man who “couldn’t even hold a spoon and feed” himself.

But four months after he received a treatment usually reserved for cancer patients, he was walking again. Today, he still needs a wheelchair but has made amazing progress.

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"It's been incredible. I was in a dire place, but now I can swim and cycle and I am determined to walk."

Basil Sharrack, a researcher participating in a groundbreaking study involving 20 MS sufferers, told BBC News that the cancer treatment could "potentially reverse disability." But it's only for people with a certain form of MS and does come with some significant risks.

That cancer treatment is one everyone has heard of, chemotherapy, and essentially reboots the immune system back to a point before it caused MS, explained consultant Professor John Snowden.

It's called an autologous haematopoietic stem cell transplant (HSCT). Using their own stem cells, patients are given a bone marrow transplant to basically destroy their broken immune system. The stem cells are harvested at such an early stage that they've not yet formed the triggers for the disease.

Some people who were paralyzed before the cancer treatment have been able to walk again. A study last year on its effects revealed a major decline in disability among the those tested, and those benefits lasted four years at the least.



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“It’s clear we have made a big impact on patients’ lives, which is gratifying,” Snowden said.

The condition is a “disabling disease of the central nervous system that disrupts the flow of information within the brain, and between the brain and body,” according to the **National MS Society**. The cause is unknown but occurs when myelin, a protective layer that surrounds nerve fibers in the brain and spinal cord, is damaged. The immune system attacks the layer, which leads to scarring. Damaged myelin ruins nerve signals, eventually leading to permanent neurodegeneration. It has many varied symptoms, from fatigue and numbness to vision problems, cognitive and emotional changes, and trouble walking.

Most people are diagnosed in their 20s and 30s.

According to the *Guardian*, the **cancer treatment** only works on a particular form, called relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis. In this form, patients have flare-ups of symptoms that can last for a few days or even few months. In between these flare-ups, symptoms are mild or disappear. Most cases of MS take this form, and drugs can slow its progression but can’t cure it.

Only patients who’ve had two or more relapses within 12 months haven’t responded to drug treatment. Those who’ve had MS for at least a decade will benefit from the new therapy.

England's Royal Hallamshire Hospital and hospitals in the U.S., Sweden, and Brazil are involved in an international trial that is studying how the cancer treatment benefits patients. If the trial is successful, it could mean that the transplant becomes the standard for a lot of MS patients. The cost is about as expensive as treating the condition for a year.

But since it doesn't involve new drugs, instead using cells right inside the patient's body, drug companies aren't helping the study move forward, said Professor Richard Burt of Northwestern University.

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