

<http://www.mirror.co.uk/lifestyle/health/pioneering-110000-stem-cell-trial-5556529>



M · Lifestyle · Health · Soldiers

Pioneering £110,000 stem cell trial treatment saved the life of an army medic

20 April 2015

By **Tina Robins**

Ex army medic Katrina Brown and her friends raised £110,000 to send her for pioneering stem cell treatment in the US – which is finally now available on the NHS



Lifesaving: Katrina Brown

When [army medic](#) Katrina Brown returned from a three-month tour in Basra, Iraq, in 2003 she was relieved to get home safe and sound.. but four years later she began to feel ill.

Katrina, 32, ended up battling for her life after being diagnosed with a rare auto-immune disease, systemic sclerosis – a form of scleroderma that was slowly killing her.

Pioneering stem cell treatment which she needed was not available in the UK on the NHS and for three years after her diagnosis she believed little could be done – until she discovered trials being done in the US.

But it came at a huge cost – more than £110,000.

And with her condition worsening each day, she had just weeks to raise the money.

Now, 10 months after she successfully underwent the procedure and returned home, autologous stem cell treatment is finally being offered to patients in the UK with auto-immune conditions including multiple sclerosis.



Katrina Brown: Pioneering treatment

No one knows why Katrina developed systemic sclerosis where your [immune system](#) attacks you hardening skin and organs, eventually killing you.

She was told it could be linked to exposure to toxic chemicals and it wasn't until she started doing some research that she discovered other soldiers had suffered similar illnesses.

She says: "When we left Iraq I was handed a card that said I'd been exposed to depleted uranium. I was young, so I didn't take much notice at the time."

The material, which was used by British and American forces to increase the effectiveness of bombs and bullets, has since been linked to a host of illnesses among veterans and Iraqi civilians.

But no link has been made in Katrina's case, ruling out the MoD or veterans' charities funding her case.

She had left the army and was working as a hospital theatre technician when she noticed her hands and feet were becoming cold and numb, and she began to suffer aches and pains.

At first she was diagnosed with Raynaud's disease, which affects blood flow. Her hands were so badly affected she struggled to use the equipment.



Katrina Brown: Pioneering treatment

One day a surgeon suggested she could be suffering from something worse. Tests confirmed systemic sclerosis.

For several years she and soldier husband Martin, 46, coped as best they could but soon she had to give up work.

But she wasn't prepared to give up and it was while she was surfing the internet that she found a patient who had been given an autologous stem cell transplant at [Northwestern Memorial Hospital](#) in Chicago.

Dr. Richard Burt's experimental treatment involved a course of chemotherapy to destroy the patient's immunity and stem cells, then harvesting and re-injecting new cells to restart the immunity.

The procedure was risky but the success rate for those who survived it was good. The only problem was the hefty price tag – and [the NHS](#) would not fund the treatment.

So, with the help of family, fellow army wives and friends Katrina set about raising the cash.



Katrina Brown: Serving in Iraq

Martin, who's based at South Cerney in Gloucestershire, ran five sponsored half marathons in five days to help get the ball rolling.

Katrina exhausted herself with fundraisers.

"I didn't have an alternative," she says. "You need treatment within four years and I was in my fourth year. I had to do it."

In October 2013, almost £20,000 had been raised for her to go to Chicago for an intensive round of testing.

It was close. Her heart and lungs were already showing signs of damage.

"It felt amazing when Dr Burt said yes to treating me," she says.

But he warned her she needed the procedure within weeks. Returning to the UK she faced a huge challenge to raise another £90,000.

Her international army of supporters pulled out all the stops. They ran, climbed, danced, cycled, made a saucy calendar and baked cakes.

Help for Heroes paid for flights and accommodation and by March the target had been reached. "The last money came in on the day we were due to pay the hospital," says Katrina.

On March 23 last year the couple flew to the States.

After a first bout of chemotherapy she suffered days of pain as she was given shots to make her body produce extra stem cells.

She says: "The lowest point was when they strapped me to the table to harvest them. I was hooked up to a machine for 10 hours."

A week later another round of chemo knocked her immune system out before her stem cells were replaced.

This was the crucial time and a bad reaction could have been fatal. But she began to recover and, after a third dose of chemo, she left hospital.

Soon she began to notice her tightened skin softening and movement returning to her stiffened joints.

Dr Burt paid tribute to her fighting spirit: "She took it on herself to find out what was out there, and because of that she came to Chicago.

"Her personality played a strong role in her outcome, never mind getting the treatment. This treatment does miracles for these patients.



Katrina Brown: Recovered

"I never use the word 'cure' but we are seeing stunning results that can make you start thinking that way. Nothing else really helps the disease."

Katrina returned to the UK in June and even though her immunity is still only the same as a newborn baby, she is campaigning to raise awareness of the condition and the stem cell treatment now available in the UK.

She says: "I'm here thanks to the army of people who have fought so hard to save my life. Raising awareness for others is the least I can do."