



Bacon's

Cell transplants show promise in treating MS

By JIM RITTER
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Justin Sears, a college student, could barely read his notes.

The hand tremors from his rapidly progressing multiple sclerosis were getting worse. He also was fatigued and having trouble with his balance. It got so bad that Sears had to drop out of school.

So he volunteered for an experimental immune-system treatment at Northwestern Memorial Hospital. MS occurs when the immune system goes haywire and attacks the protective coating that insulates nerve fibers. Dr. Richard Burt gave Sears a stem-cell transplant, in effect giving him a new immune system.

Sixteen months later, Sears is attending classes again at Moraine Valley Community College. His writing is better. His balance has improved.

"One of my favorite things is to walk down the stairs with my hands in the air and say, 'Look, no hands,'" he said.

Burt says stem-cell transplants might be able to stop the progression of MS, especially in early-stage patients. Burt also has done stem-cell transplants on patients with other diseases of the immune system, including lupus, Crohn's

disease and rheumatoid arthritis. Lupus patients, he said, have done "phenomenally well."

But stem-cell transplants for immune system diseases still are in the early stages. "We don't know yet what the potential for this therapy will be," said Dr. Bruce Cohen, an MS specialist at Northwestern University Medical School.

And stem-cell transplants can have serious complications. In a University of Washington Medical Center study announced last week, one of the 26 patients with severe MS who received transplanted stem cells died not long afterward.

In the University of Washington study, 80 percent of patients either stayed the same or improved. A few got worse.

Burt said a study of 29 patients he directed at Northwestern and the Medical College of Wisconsin had similar results.

Burt's study involved patients with advanced MS. They had an average MS score of 7, meaning they could walk only a few steps unaided. Burt said he thinks the stem-cell treatment would work better in patients with less advanced MS.

He's seeking funding for a study of earlier-stage patients. For information, call (312) 908-0059.