

New hope for leukemia patients

Northwestern Hospital is first in nation to try new treatment

By Diego Buñuel
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Kurt Borchers battled the disease for years. After the first chemotherapy treatments, his leukemia receded, leaving him hopeful that he would live to see his three children grow up.

But time and again, the illness came back—even after he received a bone marrow transplant from his brother.

At a Monday news conference at Northwestern Memorial Hospital, Borchers smiled as he held his wife's hand. For the first time in four years, an end to the disease might be in sight.

Borchers of Morris, Ill. is the first patient in the United States to undergo a revolutionary treatment to fight leukemia.

On Jan. 5, he received an injection of lymphocytes—a form of white blood cells that the body produces to fight diseases—from his brother, the bone marrow donor. The new cells are intended to attack the leukemia and destroy it. The problem is that in some cases they will attack the entire body. This side effect of the treatment, known as the graft versus host disease,

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can be lethal.

The novelty of the treatment comes from the fact that doctors have engineered what they call "suicide viruses" that attach themselves onto the lymphocytes supposed to attack the leukemia. If ever the lymphocytes stray from their intended mission, doctors trigger the virus' destruction by giving the patient a drug killing all of the injected lymphocytes.

"After living through chemotherapy and a bone marrow transplant, it really took its toll physically and emotionally," Borchers said. "The great thing about this treatment is that I was back to work in a week. I didn't have to recuperate for several months."

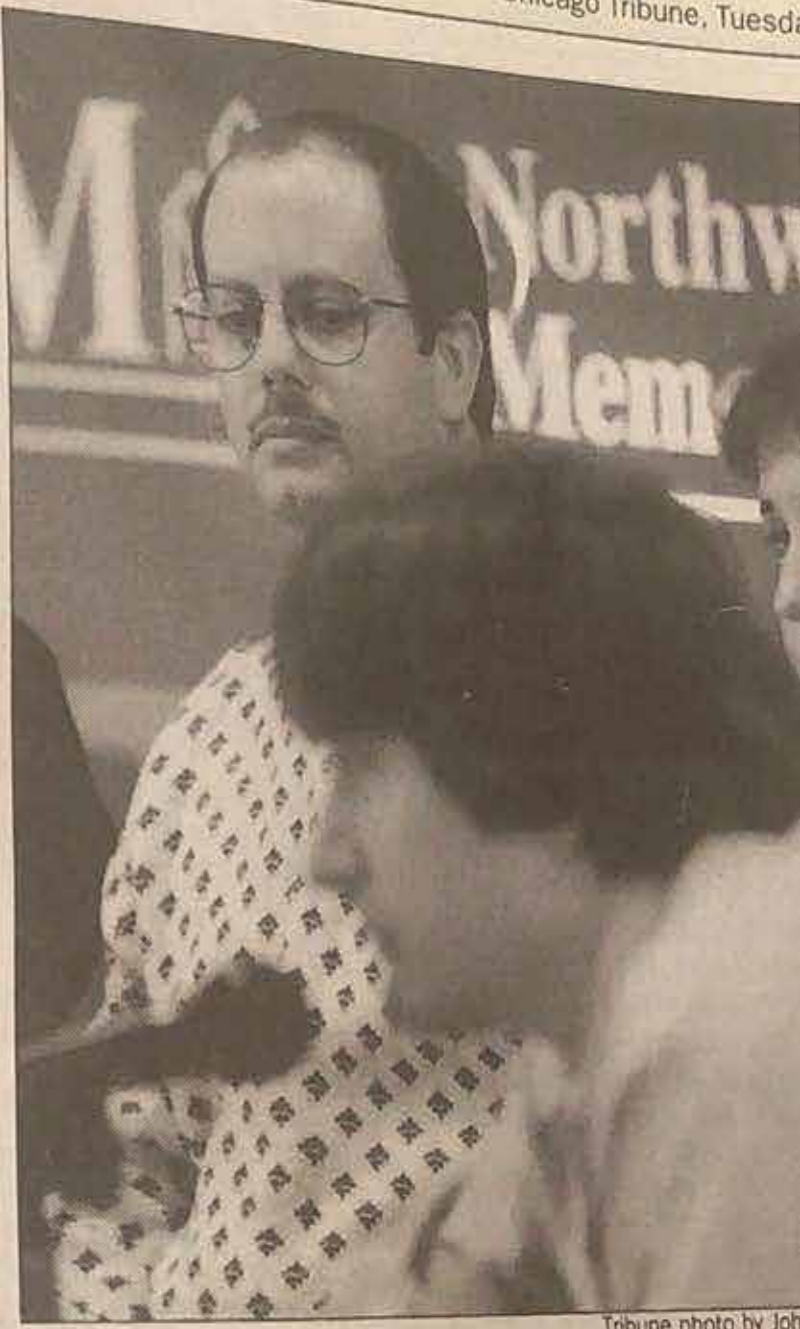
Similar experiments were conducted successfully in France and Italy, leaving doctors at Northwestern optimistic.

"The results abroad were very encouraging," said Dr. Richard Burt, director of Northwestern's allogeneic bone marrow transplant program. "It's a treatment that is technically difficult and very labor intensive, but this is a great alternative to operations such as transplants or chemotherapy."

This clinical research trial, funded by the Leukemia Society of America, is a collaborative effort of Northwestern Memorial Hospital, Iowa Methodist Medical Center and the Cancer Center of the Medical College of Wisconsin.

Borchers carries 2 billion suicide cells that seek to kill his cancer of the blood. The major improvement with this new treatment is that it can be repeated many times without having the risk of deadly side effects. The first effects of the treatment could be observed in the next three months, doctors said.

"It's been four years that I've had leukemia, and there hasn't been a day that went by without me thinking about death," Borchers said.



Kurt Borchers glances at his doctor, Richard Burt (foreground) at Monday's news conference.