



Woman to undergo stem cell procedure to treat multiple sclerosis

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By Dana Jay, Reporter



LAKE MARY, Fla. (WOFL FOX 35 ORLANDO) – A 26-year-old mother of two is about to embark on a medical journey that could stop her multiple sclerosis in its tracks. The disease, which attacks the central nervous system, affects more than 400,000 Americans.

There is no cure for multiple sclerosis, but Heather Nicole Burke believes the stem cell replacement procedure she is about to undergo could make a big difference.

Burke contacted FOX 35, because she wants others to know that the procedure.

When Burke got news that her insurance would cover the still-experimental procedure, "I looked at my phone, and I was like, 'This is real! I'm going to get my life back! I'm going to be OK! I'm going to be able to take care of my children!'"

Burke will soon travel from Florida to Chicago for a multi-step stem cell therapy that could stop her disease from progressing.

Dr. Richard Burt, the chief of immunotherapy at Northwestern Memorial Hospital, and his team will use Burke's stem cells to reset her immune system.

"It generates an immune system that ends up -- in the process of doing that -- developing a tolerance to self which puts the disease in remission," Burt explained.

Burt has been performing the experimental procedure on humans since 2008. He said he sees only seven percent of patients relapse. Burt said he often finds insurance companies are willing to pay for the therapy.

"The majority of the time insurance does pay many of the major carriers pay. Medicare pays. Medicaid in the state of Illinois pays. It's a rare carrier that doesn't pay," Burt said.

Burke said her insurance will cover all of the \$150,000 procedure. He called that a bargain, considering she is on 19 medications, one of which costs her insurance company \$200,000 each year.

Burt said the stem cell therapy is best for patients like Burke with relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis, which keeps getting worse.

"You're in fear every day. What's going to happen to me tomorrow? How bad is it going to be? Is it going to be something that leaves me in a wheel chair? Is it going to be something that leaves me unable to feed myself? Is it going to be permanent?" Burke said.

Even though 90 percent of multiple sclerosis patients have the relapsing-remitting form of the disease, Burke said she thinks too few people know about Burt's procedure.

When she found out that she'd been approved for the stem cell therapy, "It was just everything that I had been hoping for the past month."

Burke hopes that by sharing her journey others will be prompted to find out if the therapy is right for her.

To learn more about Burke, her battle with multiple sclerosis, and the procedure she's about to undergo, see below:

<http://www.facebook.com/heathernicoleHSCT>

<http://www.stemcell-immunotherapy.com>

Read more: <http://www.myfoxorlando.com/story/25095617/woman-to-undergo-stem-cell-procedure-to-treat>