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A new lease on life

Woman free of lupus after treatment

BY ERNEST TUCKER
NEIGHBORHOODS REPORTER

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Heather Markel's goal of becoming a doctor appears possible now that an experimental treatment at Northwestern Memorial Hospital has halted her lupus, a crippling disease which can be fatal.

"I don't feel a whole lot different physically, but mentally I feel better," she said Friday, two months after becoming the first patient with active lupus to undergo a revolutionary blood treatment. "When I had all those problems, I thought of how they would ruin my life. Now I'm starting to make plans again."

Markel contacted Dr. Richard Burt last fall after reading about his research. After conducting a variety of screening tests, Burt removed her "stem cells," or immature blood cells. On April 9, she was treated with strong chemotherapy for a week. After that, her purified stem cells were transfused back and helped her immune system get healthy. The lupus did not reappear.

The 24-year-old Ohio woman is still taking at least eight different kinds of medication, yet during her followup visit at Northwestern, she said she's feeling upbeat for the first time in her 13-year ordeal. Others shared her optimism.

"We're excited," said Burt, who developed the technique over the past five years. Burt stopped short of calling the procedure a "cure," but said that the "stem cell" blood transplant seems to be working.

"Short term, it has helped her where nothing else has," he said.

In five years, if Markel's lupus—an autoimmune inflammatory disease that attacks organs—is still dormant, the public could consider the disease cured, Burt said.

Yet the doctor, who came from the National Institutes of Health to Northwestern to head up the bone marrow donor program more than two years ago, cautioned that at least nine other patients must be successfully treated before the scientific community validates the procedure. The costly treatment,



BRIAN JACKSON/SUN-TIMES

Dr. Richard Burt (right) of Northwestern Memorial Hospital has successfully treated Heather Markel's (wearing cap) lupus. With them Friday are Dr. Salim Mujais (left) and Phyllis Young, Heather's mom.

estimated at \$100,000 per patient, is not for everyone, he said.

A spokesman for the Lupus Foundation of America said its officials could not comment because they didn't know specifics.

"This is one case and it's hard to say whether this is a breakthrough," said Duane Peters.

Estimates of the number of Americans who suffer from lupus vary from about 200,000 to 2 mil-

lion, although most have very mild forms that can be relieved by taking aspirin. The exact cause of the disease is not known, although it is genetic. About 90 percent of the sufferers are female.

"I'm the type of person who does what she makes up her mind to do," said Markel, who worked her way through college despite flareups of paralyzing pain. Now, she is hoping to become an obstetrician.