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'Incurable' lupus treated with radical procedure

Associated Press

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A radical process that destroys and then revives a patient's immune system has shown early success in treating a woman with lupus, a crippling disease considered incurable, doctors said Friday.

Dr. Richard Burt at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago said Heather Markel, 24, has no signs of lupus in her system two months after undergoing the treatment.

"This is much more than you would expect from a normal remission," he said. But he acknowledged what other experts emphasized — that it's too early to tell whether the disease will return.

He added that because destroying the immune system exposes patients to other dangers, for now only the most severely afflicted lupus patients should receive the treatment — about one percent of people stricken with the disease.

Lupus makes a victim's immune system turn against its own body. The disease can be controlled with steroids and other drugs, but there is no cure.

"We are encouraged by any new treatments for lupus but we are waiting for a much wider statistical sample," said John Huber, the Lupus Foundation's executive director. "We want to be cautious of any new treatment for a disease like lupus that is characterized by periods of activity and remission."

Markel is the first patient with active lupus to receive the treatment, Burt said.

The process involves taking stem cells, which grow into bone marrow cells, from a patient's blood and purifying them while the patient's immune system is destroyed by intense chemotherapy. The purified cells are then returned so they can blossom again to recreate the immune system.

Markel, a medical student from Millersburg, Ohio, contracted lupus when she was 11. The disease attacked her lungs, kidneys, blood and central nervous system.