



Rhonda Rosner photo
HEATHER MARKEL of Millersburg is out of the hospital after undergoing revolutionary lupus treatments, which seem to be working.

Revolutionary Lupus Treatment Apparently Working For Woman

9692A By RHONDA ROSNER
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MILLERSBURG — Needing baby shots all over again is a small price for a village woman to pay for health as she recovers from an "incurable" disease.

Heather Markel comes out on her porch now to greet her guests. Legs that only a couple of months ago were almost too swollen to move run up and down steps to the bedroom she was not able to use for about six months. A colorful baseball cap covers her "Marine buzz" as her hair, sacrificed to chemotherapy, grows back. Her eyes are clear and blue.

She looks like a new person, which, in ways, she is.

Markel is the first American lupus patient to undergo a revolutionary procedure at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago. Its success can lengthen her life expectancy to 55 to 60 more years. With the threat of kidney failure, she may have lived only 10 or 15 more years without the treatment, she said.

Markel, 24, who struggled for 13 years with lupus, a "controllable, but incurable" disease, said her immune system right now compares to that of a 2-month-old infant. She is scheduled for her basic immunizations in about a year.

Dr. Richard Burt, who directed the procedure, said a prognosis is difficult to make at this point.

"This is the first time this has ever been done, so we can't really tell what will happen," Burt said. "We'll just

have to follow her (progress).

"I don't know how durable it will be. We have to give it time to find out. But at least this is the first time since the onset at age 11 that she has no evidence clinically of the disease."

It will take at least five years to evaluate the success of the procedure, Burt, who is head of the allogeneic bone marrow transplantation program at Northwestern, said.

The success of the procedure gave instant celebrity status to Burt and his patient. Markel says they were interviewed at the hospital at a news conference attended by CNN, Fox, WGN, NBC, CBS and a Spanish-speaking network. She was photographed for the *Chicago Sun Times*.

"After the press conference, we went to the lab for phone interviews

with WKLM (Millersburg). UPI and, later, we had a conference call with the Sun Times," Markel said.

Burt was interviewed by *USA Today*. Markel hasn't seen all of her broadcasts, but did say she will be sent a copy of a tape and news releases. Her mother, Phyllis Young of Millersburg, and Dr. Salim Mujais, her kidney specialist, were present at the press conference.

The experimental procedure, which has been tested in Europe, has produced positive results in multiple sclerosis patients. The same procedure was applied for the first

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LUPUS

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time at Northwestern to a rheumatoid arthritis patient.

The extent of Markel's symptoms made her a perfect candidate for the nation's first clinical trial using a bone marrow transplant to treat lupus.

After several weeks of waiting and recuperating from lupus-related illness, she was admitted on April 1 for the procedure that was to keep her hospitalized for three weeks. The transplant was performed on April 9.

Her overactive immune system, the crux of lupus, was destroyed by chemotherapy. The marrow was replaced by about 2 million healthy stem or immature cells that were generated in Markel's own body through hormone injections. The cells were removed from her body and stored until it was time for re-injection into her system.

To date, Markel is still the only American lupus patient to undergo the transplant.

The replacement left her a clean slate of immunities that will build up over time. In the meantime, her new system will have to be re-immunized and she has to be cautious not to contract any diseases.

"It took 10 days before my white-cell count started coming up," Markel said. "It started at zero."

Because her platelet count also was drastically low, Markel said she received a lot of blood and platelet transfusions to get her hemoglobin up.

Markel said she was up and walking around the hallway the day after the transplant. Her lack of immunity made it necessary for her to stay in isolation. Her visitors had to wash their hands and wear gloves even if they just stuck their heads in her room to say hello.

Markel's recovery after the procedure was delayed by illness. Her hospital stay was extended to 3½ weeks. She came home on April 25, only three days before she was admitted to Aultman Hospital in Canton to combat a flu virus that settled in her trachea and hung on for about six weeks.

"My pulse was racing and I was short of breath," Markel said. "I wasn't really worried, but I wasn't happy either. I didn't want to go back to a hospital."

Markel's return home from Aultman was even more brief, as eight hours later, she was back in the hospital with a fever.

A case of shingles marred her release from Aultman.

"I got over it, then broke out again," Markel said. "My body was under so much stress. I'm prone to shingles because I've had it before and because of the chemotherapy. This was about the sixth time I've had it."

A recent three-day checkup at the Chicago hospital was encouraging.

"I got a good report," Markel said. "Everybody was impressed with the blood work and that my kidneys were working at a lower level than expected."

A normal level is 1.7, but Markel's level was 2.6.

"They said they would've settled for a reading of 3," Markel said. "Dialysis is no longer needed. My

doctor says it will be about six months until my kidneys are recovered as much as they're going to be."

Markel's progress is being monitored by her rheumatologist, Dr. William Blocker of Canton, who will keep in touch with Burt. In six months, Markel will return to the Chicago hospital for her next checkup. If all is well, the second checkup will be in a year.

Until her immune system is bolstered, Markel must be cautious. When she was first released from the hospital, she had to stay away from animals. Now she can be

around pets. Because people are a bigger problem, she will be avoiding crowds.

Bacteria in soil has put a temporary damper on gardening and even having house plants. Fresh flowers are permitted, but the water must be changed daily.

"I can't even swim and it's summer," Markel said.

Driving and cooking are among the activities that are permitted.

"Basically, I just have to be careful, take it easy and stay away from sick people," Markel said.

Although it may be as long as five

years before the success of the procedure actually can be determined, the quality of Markel's life already has improved. She said she is optimistic and ready to get on with her life, which now includes cleaning and organizing her upstairs bedroom.

Markel, who has been "stuck in

the house or hospital since J. is looking forward to spending this summer with her grand in Michigan and Florida.

Next summer, Markel, who to become a doctor, hopes back in medical school work through five straight

ters.