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Process promising in lupus treatment

Woman showing
no signs of disease
thought incurable

By BRIAN BERGSTEIN

of The Associated Press

CHICAGO — A radical process that destroys and then re-creates 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 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

A 24-year-old woman with lupus disease shows no signs of lupus two months after the treatment, Burt at Northwestern Memorial

Heather Markel, whose condition recently after 13 years of treatment and chemotherapy, is the first person to receive the treatment, Burt said.

A medical student from Milledgeville, Ga., Heather Markel contracted lupus when she was 11. The disease attacked her lungs, kidneys, central nervous system, leaving her unable to walk. Her kidneys and soaring blood pressure led her to Northwestern in January.

disease will return.

"We're just going to have to continue to follow her," Burt said. "But at least we have a short-term remission with no evidence of disease."

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 1 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.

The number of Americans with lupus is disputed. The Lupus Foundation of America Inc. estimates more than 1.4 million people have it, but government estimates put the number at less than half that.