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Doctors: Radical process treated 'incurable' lupus

CHICAGO (AP) 9492H — 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 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.

"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 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.

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.

"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 is also being tried on people with multiple sclerosis and rheumatoid arthritis in several hospitals around the world, and doctors hope it may someday be successful against all three diseases.

"I think this represents an important finding," said Dr. John Klippel, clinical director of the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases in Bethesda, Md. He was not involved in treating Markel. "One certainly looks forward to a continuation of these studies and the results in other patients."

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.

Doctors had moderate success treating her with steroids and chemotherapy, but she came to Northwestern in January with soaring blood pressure and failing kidneys.

Since the stem cell transplant in April, Markel's kidneys have returned to normal, her strength is back and she has sharply lowered the amount of steroids she is taking.

"I've been doing fine. I think about what it would be like to be normal, not to take medicines," Markel said. "... I don't know really what it's like to not go into the hospital every time you get sick."