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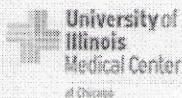
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Stem Cell Research Offers Hope For Lupus Patients

Procedure Appears To Create New Immune System

POSTED: 8:29 a.m. CDT June 28, 2002
UPDATED: 11:13 a.m. CDT June 28, 2002

CHICAGO -- Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago is one of the only institutions in the country doing studies of stem cell transplants with a patient's own blood that could help treat a number of diseases.

Collecting stem cells from a patient's blood stream is much easier than taking it from a patient's bone marrow because it can be done outside of an operating room, and it doesn't require general anesthesia. Northwestern is using the procedure to treat a number of diseases like lupus, multiple sclerosis, Crohn's disease, and rheumatoid arthritis.

Dr. Deanna Lites interviewed a doctor and two patients involved in the research. The patient is Susan Glenn, 29, who has systemic lupus erythematosus, an auto-immune disease that causes a person's immune system to begin attacking his or her own organs.

"It didn't affect me until last year," Glenn said. "(Then) it started to affect me."

Glenn finds it difficult to communicate because her brain is one of the organs affected by the disease. Another patient, Kathy Hammons, said that looking at Susan was like looking in a mirror, because it was a reminder of how lupus nearly killed her three years ago.

"I had brain involvement, so I was unable to watch a movie," Hammons said. "I was unable to read a book."

Hammons' brain was not the only area affected. In her case, lupus was destroying her heart, pancreas, and lungs. She said none of the medication she took helped.

"I couldn't climb stairs," Hammons said. "I couldn't walk farther than 100 feet. They probably gave me about 90 days to live."

Then Hammons found out about the new research at Northwestern, where doctors like Dr. Ann Traynor were using a patient's own stem cells to fight the disease.

"When we began the program, all we indicated to patients and all we hoped was that we would arrest the fulminant process of their disease," Traynor said.

But the stem cells did more than just stop the disease. They reversed it.

Stem cells, which are immature blood cells produced in the bone marrow, have the extraordinary ability to transform a diseased immune system into a new, healthy one.

Here's how the procedure is designed to work:

Glenn's stem cells are removed from her bloodstream. The stem cells are separated in the laboratory from other blood components and are frozen. Then Glenn is given chemotherapy to destroy any harmful cells still in her body. A few weeks later, the stem cells from the lab are put back into Glenn's bloodstream, in a process similar to a blood transfusion. Those stem cells travel into her bone marrow to produce the new immune system.

Traynor said the results from the procedure on lupus patients have been remarkable.

"We never anticipated the extent to which the lungs, heart, kidneys, and brains would be able to return to normal," Traynor said.

Traynor said it would take a few weeks to determine whether Glenn's transplant is a success. Traynor said that once Glenn's transplant was complete, she would be taken off most of her medication within a couple of months and within six months should be getting back to normal.

Meanwhile, Kathy Hammons said the procedure was a life saver for her.

"I've been free of any lupus symptoms and any lupus drugs for three years," Hammons said. "I'm like any normal 43-year-old now."

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