

Exclusive: Cancer Breakthrough

PILL OF HOPE

By BRONWYN HURRELL

This article appeared on the front page of "The Advertiser", Adelaide on Tuesday 10 April 2001.

A TRIAL of a revolutionary anti-cancer pill by an Adelaide hospital has produced its first breakthrough result.

A young man whose home town raised money for him to be part of the medical experiment has gone home from the Ashford Cancer Centre with new hope for a healthy future. Greg Jerrett, 25, of Boggabri in New South Wales, is the first Australian treated with the cancer drug.

Until the trial there was no apparent treatment for his disease, gastrointestinal stromal tumour, a rare cancer of the bowel lining, which spread to his liver. The tumours affect about 30 Australians a year.

The pills, known at this stage only as STI 571, from Novartis Pharmaceuticals, are taken four times a day and are 'enzyme inhibitors'.

Unlike normal cancer treatments, they only attack the abnormal cells - and are taken orally.

Mr Jerrett was diagnosed last June. By January the cancer was inoperable.

Sydney oncologist David Goldstein, who referred Mr Jerrett to Ashford, said yesterday about a third of patients in overseas trials had tumours vanish completely. Tumours in many more patients became inactive under the treatment.

'It's a bit early to say it has saved his life,' Dr Goldstein said of Mr Jerrett's treatment. 'What it has done is taken a cancer for which there was no treatment available and given him a treatment that we can actually use.'

'It's exciting, not so much because it's going to cure a cancer which is common - because it's not - but it's a really strong example of a whole new form of therapy.'

'There may be other ones that will work on more common cancers.' Dr Goldstein, of the Prince of Wales Hospital, referred Mr Jerrett to Dr Dusan Kotasek at Ashford - the first Australian hospital to be given ethics committee clearance to test a drug against the tumours.

Now the four-times-a-day pill is likely to be tested in other Australian hospitals.

Mr Jerrett was an outpatient of Ashford during February and March. Dr Goldstein said other patients had been treated at Ashford since then and people across the country were waiting to take part in the trial when other hospitals received the go-ahead.

While experimental treatment is free, Mr Jerrett needed to pay for some medical scans and for accommodation and travel.

The citizens of Boggabri rallied to raise \$10,000 to send him and long-time girlfriend Kylie Devine, 22, to Adelaide.

``I never really gave up, but for a while there it was looking pretty sketchy,'' Mr Jerrett said. ``The town of Bogga, she certainly stood behind us, that's for sure.``

Mr Jerrett is now back in Boggabri and, although he still has some bad days, is feeling ``100 per cent'' better than before. A recent scan showed his tumours were inactive.

Miss Devine, whom Mr Jerrett largely credits for helping him through the past year, thanked Dr Goldstein and the Adelaide doctors. ``All of the staff at Ashford Cancer Centre, they were phenomenal,'' she said.

Ashford said it was unable to comment at this stage.

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Caption: DELIGHT: Greg Jerrett with Kylie Devine yesterday, and scans showing the tumours active as dark areas, left, and inactive after his Adelaide treatment.

Illus: Photo (color): greg jerrett and kylie devine
Photo: scans of cancerous tumours (2) Photo: anti-cancer pill 'sti 571'

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