

Clinical trials a dose of hope

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WA blood cancer patients are getting access to the world's most promising treatments

When Perth haematologist Professor Chan Cheah worked in the US, he could offer his desperately ill cancer patients who had exhausted all treatment options the chance to try novel drugs in order to potentially buy themselves more time.

"I trained in Melbourne and the US and when a patient ran out of options, I was used to having a whole bunch of trials you could put them on," he explained.

"When I came back from the US to Perth, my patients who were in that situation just died. I told myself that this is not good enough. We need to change things."

It was the powerful motivator behind his Blood Cancer Research Western Australia 2016 collaboration, which continues to run multiple clinical trials for WA blood cancer patients at three sites in Nedlands.

For many people, experimental drugs offer hope when conventional treatments such as chemotherapy have failed.

“Most patients are treated with chemotherapy and while some are cured with chemotherapy, many are not,” added Professor Cheah, who is also a consultant haematologist at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital.

“When chemotherapy doesn’t work, we are essentially either looking for new treatments or clinical trials, which is the best way to get new treatments in order to keep these people alive or have them live longer.”

Statistics around these types of cancers are grim. Last year alone, 17,321 Australians were diagnosed with a blood cancer such as leukaemia, lymphoma or myeloma.

Blood cancers combined are the second most diagnosed cancers in Australia and the second highest cause of cancer-related deaths.

In fact, 47 Australians today will be told they have a blood cancer and 15 will die from it. It also remains the most commonly diagnosed childhood cancer.

Even if the life-prolonging effect of a clinical trial is small, it is still extra time that can be spent with family, fulfilling an ambition or even just getting one’s affairs in order. Professor Cheah said clinical trials were important to ensure future generations had better treatment options.

“We go and hunt down what we think are the most promising or exciting new drugs and approach the drug companies in America or Europe and say ‘hey, let’s do this trial in Perth,’” he said.

“By opening these trials in WA, our patients have access to the most promising drugs in the world. . . and they tend to be approved more quickly.”

He said these treatments could otherwise be too costly for patients to access privately.

“That is when you see things like crowdfunding, when the drug might work but it is not PBS listed and it is about \$100K a year, so we always try to offer people like that clinical trials,” Professor Cheah said.

Initially, BCRWA ran about eight clinical trials with 30 patients, however there are now 30 open to more than 100 patients each year due to support from the Snowdome Foundation, a blood cancer charity, and donations from other local philanthropists.

“This allows me to hire doctors to help run these trials,” said Professor Cheah. Girrawheen metalwork supervisor Robert Sutherland, 61, was diagnosed with lymphoma in 2019 but reluctant to undergo chemotherapy because of the gruelling side effects, so he opted to take part in a clinical trial designed by Professor Cheah.

“My initial prognosis was a 60 per cent chance of living if I had chemotherapy but I didn’t want to do chemo, so I started on the trial and two years on there have been no side effects other than a rash and I’ve been told I’m now in 100 per cent remission,” he beamed.

“This work is so important and has given me precious time with my wife and three daughters and I didn’t even have to stop working.”

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