

SMART DRUGS

- A New Hope in the fight against cancer

Cancer is a leading cause of death worldwide. While major advances in cancer chemotherapy have been achieved over the years, increasing the cure rate as well as the average survival of cancer patients, conventional chemotherapy nevertheless suffers the drawback of significant associated toxicity.

In the quest for better treatment, specific therapy that targets the cancer cells and boosts efficacy while minimizing the “collateral damage” to normal cells of the body, remains the holy grail of anti-cancer treatment strategy.

Over the last few years, targeted therapy has become a reality.

NEW HOPE

A patient of mine, Madam H, Vietnamese lady in her early sixties, was confined to a wheelchair late last year. She was suffering from advanced breast cancer with spread of the cancer to the bones, liver and lungs.

Today, Madam H is back on her feet, completely pain free and able to travel as she pleases. Increasingly, patients like Madam H are seeking this new form of anti-cancer treatment known as targeted therapy. The drugs in such therapy are often described as “smart drugs”.

The situation could not be more different when Madam H first flew in from Hanoi, Vietnam to see me. Her cancer was labeled as “terminal” by many, oppressing her with a profound sense of hopelessness. Having learned about the availability of targeted cancer therapy, she came to Singapore for consultation. After our discussion, she gradually understood what the latest advances in cancer treatment could offer her. With a renewed sense of courage, she started on treatment with targeted therapy with gratifying results.

HOW SMART DRUGS WORK?

Drugs in targeted therapy are “smart” in the sense that they are able to home in to the cancer cells and destroy them while avoiding injury to the normal cells of the body, akin to smart bombs in warfare. Conventional chemotherapy on the other hand is more like artillery. We need no convincing that artillery can effectively destroy the enemy. What we are worried about is the collateral damage it causes and innocent civilians are often harmed.

“Smart drugs” increase our chance of winning the war against the cancer very much like the way smart bombs increase our chance of victory in a war of the real world. “Smart drugs” may be in the form of a small designer molecule or an antibody. We now have the technology to artificially create antibodies that attack cancer cells.

TARGETED THERAPY IN SINGAPORE

Singapore has available the full range of anti-cancer targeted therapies currently in clinical use. Just as important in the overall strategy of a war against cancer, cancer physicians in Singapore are supported a whole suite of sophisticated medical laboratories capable of determining the genetic profiles of certain cancers thus predicting

their vulnerability or resistance to specific targeted therapy.

One cannot overemphasise the pivotal role of better knowledge, like “military intelligence”, in guiding the more appropriate use of the anti-cancer weapon to achieve the best possible results.

Stories like that of Madam H are not unique. Mr M, a most pleasant gentleman in his mid-forties, will be returning to Singapore from his home town in Vladivostok, Russia for medical evaluation of his response of treatment. He has undergone successful combination chemotherapy and targeted therapy for aggressive lymphoma in Singapore. From our telephone conversation last month, he reported that he was completely free of symptoms.

It is personally most gratifying to be able to utilise these new treatments and new understanding to help many patients in need. I look forward to seeing Mr M.

This article is written by **Dr Wong Seng Weng**
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Our Doctor

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Apart from his practice at The Cancer Centre, Dr Wong is currently also a visiting consultant of the National University Hospital where he is a tutor for medical oncologists-in-training. He is a visiting consultant medical oncologist of Mount Elizabeth Hospital, Mount Elizabeth Novena Hospital, Mount Alvernia Hospital and Raffles Hospital.

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Dr Wong specialises in the diagnosis and treatment of adult cancers with special interest in breast cancers, lung cancers and gastrointestinal cancers.



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