Virus study leading war on brain cancer

RESEARCH

RESEARCH TAKING place in Leeds could see the development of a revolutionary new treatment for brain cancer.

Around 9,000 people are diagnosed with brain cancer in the UK every year, and while treatments for many cancers have improved recently, the prognosis for patients with this form of the illness has barely changed.

Though rare, brain cancer presents a number of major challenges.

It's impossible to diagnose early because the symptoms develop so rapidly – and it affects children, adults and the elderly, with no apparent links to their lifestyle.

"It is a very scary disease," said Prof Susan Short, who is leading a team at the University of Leeds and Leeds Teaching Hospitals Trust which is researching a potential new treatment.

The statistics are shocking. Brain cancer kills more people under the age of 40 than any other type of cancer and more children each year than leukaemia.

And the number of people who die from the illness is rising steadily, up 27 per cent since 2002 compared to only five per cent rise for cancer generally.

Unlike some cancers, it resists all attempts to tackle it with conventional treatments. Even after surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy, tumours never really disappear.

But now Prof Short's research group, based at Leeds Cancer Centre at St James's Hospital, is investigating a revolutionary viral therapy for brain cancer.

It is running a two-year clinical trial into the use of a virus which can be injected into patients to target and kill brain cancer cells.

If successful, the virus will attack brain tumours while leaving healthy cells unharmed, as well as "switching on" the natural defences of the patient's immune system to recognise cancer cells and destroy them.

Similar techniques have been used to treat other types of cancer, but this is the first time this approach has been used for brain cancer in the UK.

Initial findings have been very promising, and have shown that a virus injected into a patient is able to make its way to brain cancer cells without harming healthy tissue.

Funding from Cancer Research UK has now enabled Professor Short and her team to test the virus on 30 patients who have a very poor prognosis.

If the trials are successful, they provide fresh hope of an effective treatment for those affected by this disease. "For decades it was felt nothing could be done for brain cancer patients," said Prof Short.

"Now a concentration of expertise at Leeds and our promising early results are finally holding out the hope of success."

CASE STUDY

‘Vicious circle’ of underfunding

MALCOLM JENKIN’S wife, Pilar, was diagnosed with the most aggressive form of tumour after collapsing on holiday in 2013.

"From the time she collapsed to the time of her death, barely six months had passed," he said.

"Brain cancer is the poor relation of cancer research generally and starved of funding."

"Maybe it’s because the prognosis is poor. But it’s a vicious circle – the prognosis is poor because not enough funding is going into it."

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