

SOUTHWESTERN NEWS

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MELANOMA VACCINE TRIAL OPENS IN DALLAS

DALLAS — April 7, 1998 — UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas is participating in a worldwide melanoma vaccine trial aimed at preventing recurrences of the cancer.

UT Southwestern, one of 21 study sites in North America, is the only one in Texas. Four centers in Europe, two in Israel and two in Australia also are participating.

"Participation in this vaccine trial offers patients of UT Southwestern's regional melanoma center a new option," said Dr. Willis Maddrey, executive vice president for clinical affairs. "We are fortunate to have such an active melanoma program that benefits the entire state of Texas."

The melanoma vaccine, developed at the John Wayne Cancer Center, Santa Monica, Calif., is designed to stimulate a patient's immune system to kill tumor cells in the same way that the flu vaccine provides immunity for the flu.

The present study is for patients whose cancer was removed but had cancer spread to their lymph nodes (stage III) and patients who had metastatic disease that was successfully removed (stage IV). Both groups of patients have a high likelihood of recurrence. The present trial will compare the effectiveness of the vaccine against the current best-treatment option.

Since the 1970s scientists have been trying to develop cancer vaccines to fight recurrence of melanoma. When cells becomes cancerous, the proteins on the surface of the cell change, but the change is not very great. Occasionally a melanoma patient's own immune system will react to those changes and destroy the cancer. Some patients' immune systems respond better than others. Scientists have worked to produce a melanoma vaccine that would boost the immune system and work to prevent recurrence.

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The present melanoma vaccine was developed using melanoma cells from several patients; each cell line has a different complement of abnormal cell-surface proteins. The cells are grown in the laboratory and irradiated so that they no longer can divide; however, the proteins on their surface remain unaffected. When injected into patients, these "dead" cells stimulate the immune system and elicit an immune response against the abnormal proteins. Theoretically, the patient's response is strong enough to destroy the cells that display these proteins on their surface -- the cancerous cells.

"This vaccine should cover about 96 percent of the abnormal proteins found on all melanoma cells," said Dr. James Huth, chairman of surgical oncology and the principal investigator of the UT Southwestern melanoma trial. "We are very hopeful that with vaccine treatment the lives of stage III and IV melanoma patients will be significantly prolonged."

All participants in the trial will receive either the melanoma vaccine or the current best therapy which uses a different mechanism to stimulate the immune system. Each patient will be monitored closely throughout the trial. If recurrence does occur, several standard options are available.

The UT Southwestern center, with its strong screening and early diagnosis program, offers state-of-the-art treatment, including lymphatic mapping to identify patients whose cancer has spread to the lymph nodes. The mapping procedure, which identifies the first lymph node that drains from the tumor, eliminates the excision of unaffected nodes if that first node is cancer-free. Center physicians in the study are Dr. Barry Levinson, assistant professor of internal medicine; Dr. R. Stan Taylor, associate professor of dermatology; Dr. A. Marilyn Leitch, associate professor of surgical oncology and holder of the George and Carol Poston Professorship in Breast Cancer Research; Dr. David Euhus, assistant professor of surgical oncology; Dr. Samuel Bieligm, assistant professor of surgical oncology; and Huth, who holds the Occidental Chemical Chair in Cancer Research.

The study is sponsored by the National Institutes of Health, and is being coordinated by the John Wayne Cancer Center.

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