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Temecula woman participates in trial for breakthrough cancer drug

By: DEIRDRE NEWMAN - Staff Writer

TEMECULA ---- Like many diseases, breast cancer can strike with random impunity.

Just ask Joan Wheatley.

Three years ago, she was enjoying retirement in her home along the 11th fairway of the Redhawk Golf Course. The 55-year-old exercised, ate nutritiously and didn't let herself get above her ideal weight.

Then, Wheatley became one of the estimated 200,000 people who are diagnosed with breast cancer each year in the United States. What set her apart from most others though, was her participation in a clinical trial for a drug called Herceptin.

Today, she is cancer-free. And she credits her clean bill of health to the drug.

Wheatley was one of more than 3,200 other women in the trial, which was conducted by a UCLA clinical research team. It was one of four trials worldwide. The results of three of the trials were published last week in the New England Journal of Medicine and they have been nothing short of revolutionary, said Dr. Simon Tchekmedyan, Wheatley's oncologist in Long Beach.

"We're talking about a non-chemotherapy treatment that attacks cells, leaves the rest of the body alone, is very targeted and specific but gives us hope that we will start curing more cancer," Tchekmedyan said.



Joan Wheatley of Temecula participated in clinical trials for a new, promising breast cancer drug. She is now cancer-free.

DAVID CARLSON Staff Photographer

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The drug is given intravenously either once a week or every three weeks, Tchekmedyan said. Wheatley had it every three weeks for a year. The studies showed that, in about half the patients, the drug reduced the risk of breast cancer returning in the next several years, Tchekmedyan said.

An official at the American Cancer Society has warned that it is much too early to suggest this amounts to a cure, however, because the women studied were followed for only three years at the most. Moreover, Herceptin is only for the estimated 20 percent of breast cancer cases in which the gene HER-2 is present.

For Wheatley, Herceptin was a godsend and she has embarked on a crusade to raise awareness about its potency.

"It's so exciting to spread the word, it gives me chills," she said.

Wheatley and her husband, Ronald, moved to Temecula in 1999, smitten with the homes surrounding the Redhawk golf course. A petite, spunky woman with red hair, Joan Wheatley has two children and five grandchildren. She was a flight attendant and owned a travel agency in Orange County before retiring in 1995.

Her idyllic life was shattered when she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She had gone in for a routine, yearly physical and asked for an ultrasound in addition to a mammogram because her breasts contain fibroids, which makes it more difficult for a mammogram to show problems, she said.

As it turned out, the mammogram gave no indication of cancer. But the ultrasound showed a lump in her left breast, she said.

After doctors removed the lump and surrounding lymph nodes, they determined the cancer had spread. At that point, she followed her doctor's suggestion to undergo a mastectomy. She also chose to have her other breast removed about a year after her treatment as a preventive measure.

Tchekmedyan, aware of the clinical trials for Herceptin, tested Wheatley for the HER-2 gene.

The drug works by attacking the protein produced by the HER-2 gene, Tchekmedyan said. The cancer cells in HER-2 patients have a great deal of this protein, which enables them to divide faster and spread. Herceptin targets and binds to the protein, destroying the cells, he said.

While Herceptin works for breast cancer, other drugs that work in a similar fashion have been found to be successful against other types of cancer, such as lymphoma and colon cancer, the doctor said.

Although Wheatley received Herceptin as part of the clinical trial, she also went through three months of chemotherapy. Then she did another three months of Herceptin and Taxotere, a chemotherapy drug that works in tandem with Herceptin, she said. She continued on the Herceptin for nine more months, finishing in July 2003.

Now, doctors say she is cancer-free ---- one of the lucky ones. An estimated 40,000 people die from breast cancer each year.

The clinical trials on Herceptin were so successful that they were stopped early to make the drug available to the general public, Tchekmedyan said. This is a major benefit because the drug is now standard treatment as far as insurance companies are concerned, Wheatley said.

Wheatley was so inspired by going through the clinical trial that she is doing whatever she can to

let others know about the drug. She did some volunteer work at Michelle's Place, a nonprofit breast cancer resource center in Murrieta, and spread the word there.

"The more we can learn about breast cancer and the drugs we can use, the better off we all are," she said. "We all have mothers, sisters, grandchildren."

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