

Scientists dissolve darkness in fighting some cancers

BALTIMORE (AP) — Dr. Marcia Canto threaded a thin fiber optic line deep into the throat of Jesus Jimenez. The fiber pulsed with bright red light for 12 1/2 minutes, destroying deadly cancer cells without pain and without hurting the healthy esophagus tissue trembling just behind.

Scientists once scoffed at harnessing light to fight cancer and other diseases, but now they say such "photodynamic therapy" has potential thanks to potent new drugs that make diseased cells vulnerable to light beams.

The Food and Drug Administration recently approved light therapy to fight advanced esophageal cancer and early lung cancer. It's not a silver bullet, but it is showing promise against other cancers, too — with fewer risks than surgery or chemotherapy. It is even being tested against a leading cause of blindness and autoimmune diseases.

"It's pretty exciting," Canto said. She was treating Jimenez at Johns Hopkins University Hospital after his doctors in Puerto Rico said operating on the mid-stage tumor was too risky.

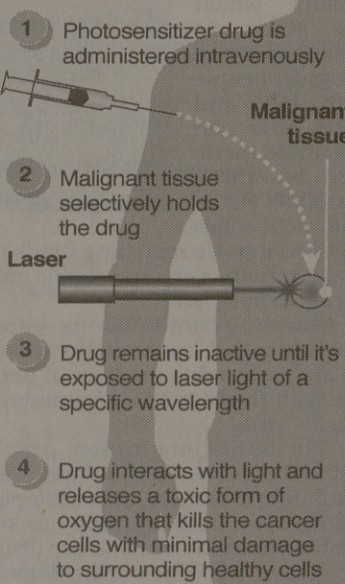
It's too early to know Jimenez's prognosis, but his main worry upon leaving the hospital hours later was to guard against a sunburn from the light-sensitive drug left in his system.

"This treatment was so easy, I can't tell you," added 83-year-old Walter Winkelmeyer, whose two treatments have left his esophagus cancer-free for six months. "My doctors had told me I had 18 months to live, and look at me now."

Winkelmeyer's tumor was caught early, but serious heart and lung problems meant he wouldn't survive any strenuous surgery. Doctors in Sarasota, Fla., said he would die, but relatives discovered Canto also was studying photodynamic

Fighting cancer

Scientists are using light-harnessing therapy to treat various forms of cancer. A look at the process:



Source: Laserscope, LumaCare AP/Justin Gilbert

therapy, or PDT, in early esophageal cancer.

Doctors have known for nearly 100 years that light could kill. Many drugs are photosensitive — it's why patients on the antibiotic tetracycline, for example, get sunburned.

The key to making light therapy work was injecting photosensitizers that concentrate in diseased cells but quickly clear out of normal cells — and then harnessing the right wavelength of light.

Blasting the disease site with a laser's non-burning red light makes the photosensitizer produce a toxic oxygen molecule that

kills targeted cells.

"It sounded kind of goofy ... that shining visual light on something would kill a cancer cell. There's been some resistance," said Dr. Stephen Hahn, who is testing the method against three intractable cancers — ovarian, advanced lung and mesothelioma — at the University of Pennsylvania.

With recent advances in laser fiber optics and photosensitizers, "we're seeing a resurgence in interest," said George Washington University's Dr. Michael Manyak, who has had success in bladder cancer and now is studying infertility-causing endometriosis.

The government has approved one photosensitizer, Photofrin, by Canada's QLT Phototherapeutics. It doesn't cure advanced esophageal cancer, but regulators determined it offered patients a longer reprieve before throats reclog. Even better, it eliminated early lung cancer in 79 percent of patients.

The drawbacks: the drug takes two days to concentrate in tumors, leaves patients prone to sunburn for six weeks, and penetrates only relatively shallow tumors.

"Any place that you can reach with a laser light-delivery system can theoretically be treated with this kind of approach," says FDA oncology chief Dr. Robert DeLap.

In the case of macular degeneration, which blinds the elderly, regular lasers can burn away vision-robbing abnormal blood vessels that grow into the eye, but they leave damaging scar tissue and the vessels grow back.

Preliminary experiments suggest therapy every three months with BPD, a next-generation Photofrin, can kill the abnormal blood vessels and block relapse. Now, over 20 North American and European hospitals are searching for proof.

Justice department looking into accusations against Starr

GREENVILLE, S.C. (AP) — The Justice Department has taken over the review of a lawyer's allegations that Kenneth Starr, the independent counsel investigating President Clinton, concealed perjury when Starr defended General Motors in a lawsuit filed by families of people killed or injured in truck fires.

U.S. Attorney Rene Josey said Monday he would look into the allegations by lawyer J. Kendall Few, who represents one of the families.

But Josey said Justice Department officials told him Tuesday they would review the matter, *The Greenville News* reported in today's editions.

"They have better expertise up there to look at certain types of things," Josey said. "And it may be that an independent counsel requires an independent counsel to investigate him."

"I'm comfortable with passing it on to them," he said.

In a sworn statement sent to Josey, U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno and the three-judge panel that appointed Starr independent counsel, Few alleges Starr knew that GM presented false testimony in the truck fires cases.

Starr "has taken active, energetic and steps to conceal and cover up such perjury." A message left at Starr's office was not returned.



Starr

"Mr. Starr and Kirklin representation of General Motors in the Cameron case was every respect," said Kyle, manager of legal and sales for GM Communications.

Few's accusations rely on analysis by GM engineer Ivey in 1973 calculating the truck fire deaths were on the automaker and what it was worth to fix the problem.

Starr testified 13 times that he could not recall why he prepared the study and he never showed it to Few.

Documents uncovered in December 1995 that GM's legal staff and regional counsel in 1981 that Ivey did the analysis for the Oldsmobile division and circulated copies to other GM employees.

Supreme Court extends immunity

WASHINGTON (AP) — Tens of thousands of local lawmakers, such as city council members, cannot be sued for their votes even if they had illegal or discriminatory motives, the Supreme Court ruled Tuesday.

The unanimous decision for the first time gave local officials the same "absolute immunity" from civil rights lawsuits their federal, state and regional counterparts have long enjoyed when introducing or voting on legislation.

"Absolute immunity for local legislators ... finds support not only in history but also in reason," Justice Clarence Thomas wrote as the court killed a lawsuit against two former Falls River, Mass., city council members.

"Whether an act is legislative turns on the nature of the act, rather than on the motive or intent of the official performing it," Thomas added.

Tuesday's ruling does not shield city officials from lawsuits stemming from the many administrative matters they carry out, such as hiring and firing employees or dealing with the public. Neither does it prevent people who believe their rights were violated by some legislative action from suing the local government.

Individual lawmakers cannot be the targets of such

lawsuits. In other words, you still can sue the folks who help run it.

National League of Cities President Brian Philadelphia City Council member, called for clear and welcome acknowledgment that municipal officials should not have to worry about being taken to court for trying to meet their responsibility to vote on public policy issues.

He said the ruling "will assure that our county courthouses are open forums."

The decision threw out a \$231,000 damage award against two former Falls River officials for a city worker's job after she complained the worker used racial slurs.

Janet Scott-Harris had been Fall River's administrator when she was hired in 1987 by the Health and Human Services Department.

Jay Grenig, a Marquette University lawyer who had studied the case, applauded the decision as a "mischief that could have been created by a particular and determining motivation for a particular case have been tremendous," he said. "There's no liability but the person who has been discriminated against still has a remedy — sue the city."



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