

Birmingham scientists turn research into hope

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Birmingham scientists are at the forefront of a major research programme which is helping to revolutionise cancer treatment.

Researchers in Birmingham, funded by Cancer Research UK, are part of a major initiative set up by Cancer Research UK and the Department of Health to create a major network of Experimental Cancer Medicine Centres (ECMC) across the UK.

The centre will lead the development of new, innovative cancer therapies through clinical trials. In Birmingham over 250 doctors, nurses, researchers and scientists are working on these projects.

The Birmingham ECMC is led by researchers at the University of Birmingham with clinical trials currently taking place at the University Hospital Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust.*

Professor Dion Morton comments: "There are a range of exciting new options being developed in the treatment of cancer, including more targeted chemotherapy, gene therapy and treatments activating the body's immune system against the disease.

The new centre will allow us to take these new treatments being developed in laboratories and get them into clinical trials, passing the benefits onto patients in the West Midlands as quickly as possible.

The funding, which started in April 2007 will continue over the next five years. It will be used to help to drive new anti-cancer treatments to patients.

This funding is on top of £8 million which Cancer Research UK spends every year on a range of research projects at the University of Birmingham.

Each year, around 50 patients take part in experimental cancer trials in Birmingham.

The current trials in Birmingham include the first studies of implantable radiological device - called 32P BioSilicon™. This device is being implanted into patients with pancreatic cancer to supplement chemotherapy – Gemcitabine for at least seven weeks. The purpose of this trial is to try and slow down the growth of the tumour, and to improve the patients' quality of life. Another area of work are trial studies of gene therapy, which is designed to target abnormal genes in cancer cells. Scientists in Birmingham have been pioneering this approach in prostate cancer using a modified (and harmless) virus to target cancer cells.

Professor Herbie Newell is director of translational research at Cancer Research UK and oversees the running of the network across the UK.

Professor Newell said: "These are fantastically exciting times in cancer research. Our understanding of how cancer works is evolving rapidly and this is helping us to design new treatments to target the disease.

He continued: "The number of people surviving is increasing. Thanks to research, advances are being made in the detection and treatment of cancer and more lives are being saved.

"The aim of the Experimental Centre Medicine Centres is to ensure basic science discoveries are developed into treatments for cancer patients as quickly as possible. They play a vital role in helping us to translate medical advances from the laboratory bench to the patient's bedside.

"In Birmingham, the ECMC ensures that we have the infrastructure and support mechanisms in place to allow us to run more clinical trials, enabling cancer patients from the Midlands to benefit from new medicines as quickly as possible."

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Their courageous efforts have already helped scientists to produce new drugs which work on previously hard to treat cancers, helping more people to live longer and have more time with their loved ones.

Professor Dion Morton is a Consultant General Surgeon at the University Hospital Birmingham and is head of the Experimental Cancer Medicine Centre Network in Birmingham.

Prof Morton said: "Local people are participating in early phase clinical trials for many different forms of cancer."

"Patients take part in the early phase trials do so for many different reasons. Conventional therapy may have failed, but often patients desire to make a contribution and see trials as a way of doing this. Patients know that, although the drug might not benefit them, it could help others in the future. It can be humbling to us as researchers to work with them.

"It would be wrong to see experimental cancer medicines as the cure for everyone. They are not. But there are exciting new treatments which are targeting the lesions that cause cancer and could provide real advances. A key element of these early trials is to define which patients are most likely to benefit from these new targeted therapies.

"People who take part in the experimental trials help us to evaluate new treatments and select those that warrant further detailed evaluation. These people could potentially help tens of thousands of patients in the future."

Key Facts about cancer

- Each year in the UK, nearly 285,000 people are diagnosed with cancer and more than 150,000 people die from the disease.
- More than one in three people in the UK will be diagnosed with cancer at some point in their lives.
- Cancer is the biggest single cause of death in the UK - one in four of us will die from the disease.
- There are over 200 different types of cancer. Breast, lung, bowel and prostate cancer account for almost half of all new cases diagnosed.
- There are many preventable risk factors for cancer including smoking, over-exposure to the sun, poor diet, excessive alcohol consumption and obesity.

ENDS

Notes to Editors:

*Researchers are also involved from Cancer Research UK's Institute of Cancer Studies, the Cancer Research UK Clinical Trials Unit, The Wellcome Trust Clinical

Experimental medicine is defined as investigation undertaken in human beings to identify mechanisms of pathophysiology or disease and to test the validity and importance of new discoveries or treatment

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