

The new cancer treatment that's thanks to a vet!

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A cancer drug originally created to treat animals with the disease is being tested on humans.

Trials with the drug, CV247, which was developed by a vet, have started at Bedford Hospital and Addenbrookes in Cambridge.

But it has already been given to seriously ill human patients on compassionate grounds, provided they had permission from their doctor and were beyond all other help.

When vet Dr John Carter started experimenting 25 years ago, he never imagined his treatment would get as far as full-scale human trial.

'Normally, drugs are developed the other way round - for humans first and then passed on for trial on animals,' he says.

'But I had just lost my dog and three friends to cancer, and I set out to find an effective non-toxic treatment. It was more in hope than in a belief, but I felt I had to find an alternative to what was available.

'Radiotherapy and chemotherapy are both very toxic to the body, and I was looking for a gentler approach.'

After years of experimenting with various compounds, Dr Carter came up with a formula he thought might work. The ingredients are a secret but it is believed to act by blocking the blood supply to cancer cells - and without a blood supply the cells die.

At the same time, CV247 is thought to act to protect the DNA of healthy cells from turning into cancerous cells.

Dr Carter began treating pets at his surgery in Harrow, North London, in 1988 and started getting positive results. Eventually, trials were undertaken with the Imperial Cancer Research Fund, and Dr Carter was given approval to use it as an official treatment for animals last year.

Then, purely by word of mouth, human patients with cancer started coming to his surgery asking for help.

'I found it a dilemma, because I'm a vet and treating human patients with an animal drug does present a problem,' he says.

'I made sure they all had a letter from their GP, so it was clear they knew what was happening. They were all people whose doctors had already given up on them, so they had nothing to lose - and as it worked in animals, there were grounds for optimism.'

Dr Carter has now set up his own pharmaceutical company, Ivy Chemicals, to market CV247 should it prove a winner in human trials. 'All the capital we have raised is going towards funding trials,' he says.

The drug is administered in fruit juice, rather than in pill or injection form like conventional cancer drugs, and patients are advised to go on a healthy diet which includes plenty of organic fruit and vegetables.

Dr Carter is cautiously optimistic. 'We have to do extensive trials over several years to prove it is a genuine treatment.'

Leading the human trials at Bedford Hospital is Dr Robert Thomas, a consultant oncologist, who has recruited 40 patients with advanced cancers of the prostate, colon and ovaries.

They will take the drug for three months - and may continue to take it if it proves successful in limiting the spread of the cancer.

'It's a product which is not like conventional chemotherapy or radiotherapy,' says Dr Thomas, who also works at Addenbrookes. 'It does not set out to kill anything that's dividing fast in a person's body.'

'Instead, you're looking at the fundamental reasons why cancers become killers and trying to switch off these pathways and make these cells dormant.'

If the trial is successful, Dr Carter envisages patients staying on the drug for life to prevent the cancer spreading again.

One of the patients on the trial is Josephine Brown, 56 and a mother of four, who has been battling against ovarian cancer for four years.

'First, I had radiotherapy, followed by chemotherapy, followed by more radiotherapy, then followed by radiotherapy and chemotherapy combined,' she says.

'In the end, I told Dr Thomas I'd had enough and wanted to look for another way. He offered me the trial as a way forward.'

'In the beginning, I just wanted to cut the cancer out and get rid of it. But I realise that I can live with cancer. As long as it can be controlled, I can deal with it.'

She says taking the compound had made her feel really well, but she knows that, only a month into the trial, it has yet to produce results.

Dr Carter is hopeful. 'If we succeed, it will be a tremendous achievement,' he says.

'It will show that success in medicine can still be achieved without having to spend millions of pounds.'