

Brain cancer victim a study in perseverance

By **ANDREW HANON, EDMONTON SUN**

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Kent Pankow and his wife Deb Hurford have been fighting Pankow's brain cancer for 10 years without coverage from Alberta Health. The couple, is pictured here in their Edmonton home on Monday. (AMBER BRACKEN/EDMONTON SUN)

In 2000, Kent Pankow was told he had a year to live.

He's still here.

"Kent is a total superstar," says his wife Deb Hurford.

Watching her chef husband battle with glioblastoma, one of the most aggressive and deadly forms of brain cancer has changed her own outlook on life.

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In 2000, Pankow had brain surgery to remove the tumour and it remained in remission until 2008, when a routine follow-up scan showed it was growing again.

Regular chemotherapy failed to kill it, and by last fall doctors in Canada said the tumour was too big and in too tricky a spot for surgery.

Pankow and Hurford refused to give up. For the past two years Pankow has tried numerous treatments, many of which aren't covered by government health insurance and cost tens of thousands of dollars.

Pankow's iron will has touched hundreds of lives, even people who don't know him. Family, friends and total strangers have stepped up to cover his medical expenses, which have hit \$150,000 and continue to climb.

He made headlines earlier this year with his fight to get the Alberta Health Services to pay for the drug Avastin, which was approved for treating some types of cancers but not his. The couple had to pay \$4,500 every two weeks for the drug.

But this spring, just as Health Canada approved it for treating glioblastoma, Avastin began losing its effectiveness on Pankow's tumour, which is known for constantly changing and mutating. The couple began looking for an alternative.

They found dichloroacetate, or DCA, a generic drug that's shown tremendous promise for treating cancer in clinical trials.

University of Alberta researchers tested it on five glioblastoma patients, none of whom were expected to live more than seven months. But 15 months later, four were still showing signs of improvement.

Now the scientists are preparing a larger testing sample.

But Pankow and Hurford aren't waiting. DCA, which is readily available and cheaper than patented cancer drugs, is being used by doctors around North America. But it's not approved by Health Canada yet, so patients must pay for it themselves.

In fact, Avastin can be bought on the Internet and self-administered — but like anything else being hawked online, there's no guaranteeing its purity or quality, or even if it's really DCA.

Pankow is going through a private clinic in Toronto. He's already consulted with doctors there and will be monitored by his family doctor in Edmonton.

It's going to cost about \$2,000 every three weeks.

Friends are planning a huge fundraiser for the couple on Saturday at the Ramada Inn on Kingsway, by the city centre airport, from noon to 7 p.m.

There will be a motorcycle rally through Elk Island National Park, followed by a car rally to an as-yet-to-be-determined destination. For kids, there will be face painting, inflatable bounce houses, balloons and goodies. There will be live music, including Gurl, Blackboard Jungle and Captain Tractor.

Steve Thompson, one of the organizers, has known Pankow for 12 years.

"I can't imagine having to fight for your life and fight for your financial wellbeing at the same time," he says. "We gotta step up. We're Canadians. We're Albertans."

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