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Doctors prescribe DCA to cancer patients

Jodie Sinnema, The Edmonton Journal

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EDMONTON - A private cancer centre in Toronto is selling itself as the first in Canada to prescribe a possibly poisonous chemical to patients, even though the compound hasn't been tested on humans and hasn't been approved by Health Canada.

In February, wife-and-husband team Drs. Humaira and Akbar Khan heard how a University of Alberta researcher used dichloroacetate (DCA) to successfully shrink tumours in rats without damaging healthy cells. Last month, they offered the water-soluble powder to cancer patients in Ontario who have exhausted all other treatments.

They did so despite dire warnings from Edmonton's Dr. Evangelos Michelakis that the chemical can be toxic and can cause imbalance, finger numbness and nerve damage.

"I agree with the warnings," said Humaira Khan, a public health epidemiologist who focuses on research in Toronto's Mediscan Cancer Centres. The clinic opened one year ago and charges patients about \$150 for one week's supply of DCA.

"But at the end of the day, it comes down to patients' rights. It comes to the patient's choice. That was the philosophy and the motivation because patients come to us and say, 'We know the risks. We understand it hasn't been studied. I don't have much to lose.' "

Khan said it's better for her clinic to supervise patients instead of having them self-medicate, as hundreds around the world are doing after hearing about Michelakis's research, published in the prestigious academic journal *Cancer Cell*.

WORLDWIDE FRENZY

The paper sparked worldwide frenzy, with patients buying questionable DCA from unproven sources and reporting their outcomes in Internet chat rooms.

"We felt we needed to do it," Khan said.

Her husband, a family physician with 13 years' experience in palliative and cancer care, is the clinic's medical director. "It didn't seem ethically right to say no," he said. "At the end of the day, even if we've saved one life, it's worth it."

Michelakis refused an interview with The Journal. He has yet to present a revised submission to Health Canada to obtain approval to begin a clinical trial of DCA on cancer patients in Edmonton.

But Dr. Terry Polevoy says the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario should take away the Khans' licences for offering a compound that hasn't been proven to shrink tumours in humans.

"They are not oncologists (cancer experts). They should not be making these decisions," Polevoy said in a telephone interview from Kitchener, Ont.

"I think they should be disciplined for using this stuff. That, to me, is unethical, to use something that has never been proved to do anything."

A spokeswoman for the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario said it's not the college's role to say which therapies a doctor can or can't use.

"It's the physician's responsibility," said Jill Hefley, associate director of policy and communications for the Ontario college. "It's about informed consent for patients that they have to understand what sort of drugs they are receiving, understand the risks and benefits."

'IT'S NOT ILLEGAL'

Alastair Sinclair, spokesman for Health Canada, said while his department doesn't recommend the use of DCA in humans for the treatment of cancer, doctors can prescribe it.

"It's not illegal, but we recommend you don't use it because it hasn't been approved," Sinclair said, noting that no Canadian manufacturer has approval to make DCA.

It's a fairly cheap, common substance that until now has been used solely for research purposes.

"At the end of the day, if you make the decision to take something that hasn't been approved and not recommended, those are the risks you're running," said Sinclair.

But Polevoy said both the college and Health Canada are shirking their responsibility to protect patients.

"Health Canada has the dubious distinction of not taking it off the market," Polevoy said.

Humaira Khan said her clinic's supply of pharmaceutical-grade DCA comes from a major American manufacturer. She and her husband spoke with Health Canada, the physicians college and the local College of Pharmacists before proceeding.

They say patients have already seen improvements.

One woman in her 70s, who almost died from chemotherapy, had a four-centimetre tumour on her shoulder that has disappeared.

One man could walk again after taking a strong dose of DCA. His nausea and severe pain also disappeared, even after he had to go off the treatment when he suffered side-effects. Some patients reported memory loss, stomach upset or tremors in their arms.

"Most of our patients have benefited from it," Humaira Khan said.

"It's hard to say how much of a benefit, but they are palliative patients and pretty much had nothing else to go on, so DCA has prolonged their life and given them a better quality of life. That gives us a lot of confidence."

jsinnema@thejournal.canwest.com

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