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Using a patient's own tumor cells as ammunition to fight their cancer

Clinical trial finds TIL therapy provides hope for survival to late-stage melanoma patients

(ORLANDO, Florida) – Doctors at the [Orlando Health Cancer Institute](#) are performing a new treatment for late-stage cancer that uses a patient's own tumor cells as a way to fight their cancer. The treatment, called autologous TIL therapy, helps patients battle melanoma, one of the most aggressive types of cancer that quickly spreads throughout the body. The treatment can offer a chance at survival for patients who have run out of options in fighting the deadly cancer.

"We're taking the T cells from the patient's own tumor and expanding these cells into a clone army. The number of T cells that can be produced is anywhere from a billion to 150 billion cells," said [Sajeve Thomas, MD](#), Medical Oncologist at the Orlando Health Cancer Institute. "We can isolate cancer-specific T cells from a patient's tumor, expand them and infuse the T cells back to the patient along with additional medications to turn on the immune system and make it more active against the cancer."

Unlike other lengthy treatments, TIL therapy is administered in a single hospital admission. Doctors use that army of T cells to fight advanced cancer, and results can be drastic, shrinking tumors in a matter of weeks with no further treatments. The Orlando Health Cancer Institute was one of the sites of a clinical trial testing TIL therapy in metastatic melanoma patients that found tumors shrank or remained stable in four out of five patients, with significant results often evident within 90 days of treatment.

"When patients respond well to the treatment, you can see those tumors melt down on the first CT scan," Thomas said. "And their responses can continue to regress over time. With one of my patients, Toni English, I remember walking in and looking at a tumor in her lung and by her kidney and saw those tumors shrink by more than 50 percent. In her most current scans, they're nonexistent. That's exciting! We're helping patients in their fight to beat back cancer."

In 2017, English was one of the patients fighting back against her cancer. After being diagnosed with an aggressive form of melanoma in 2015, she had been in remission for nearly two years. When her cancer returned and didn't respond to another round of treatment, she started to feel that she was running out of chances. After hearing about Orlando Health's reputation in oncology, English sought out Thomas, who suggested she try TIL therapy.

“We had pretty much hit the end of the road for treatment; we had tried everything that I knew was out there,” she said. “That day, Dr. Thomas came in and told us that there was an experimental new treatment, a clinical trial at Orlando Health. He asked me if I would be interested in trying it and I said, ‘If it’s there, I want to do it. If it can help somebody else diagnosed with the same cancer, I’m doing it.’”

After so many treatments without results, English kept her expectations realistic. But just six weeks after her treatment, her scans looked positive. English said that was the moment she “really felt like I had a chance at this,” and Thomas agreed.

Four years later, English is still cancer-free, and is enjoying life with her family in central Florida. She advocates for TIL therapy and often helps other melanoma patients connect and learn through support groups for people all over the world. She credits Thomas and the breakthrough therapy for saving her life.

“It has given me life back,” she said. “My husband and I have lots of things we want to do together. We have a lot of dreams and expectations for the years ahead, especially with my grandson, who brings me the greatest joy. The short bump in the road was worth the journey because it has given me back the life that I’ve always dreamed I would have.”

Researchers are working to expand TIL therapy for use in fighting other types of cancer, with trials ongoing in patients with lung, cervical and head and neck cancers. With continued development, they’re hoping it will soon be a first-line course of treatment for those with late-stage cancers.

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Courtesy: Orlando Health Cancer Institute

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ABOUT ORLANDO HEALTH

Orlando Health, headquartered in Orlando, Florida, is a not-for-profit healthcare organization with \$7.1 billion of assets under management that serves the southeastern United States.

Founded more than 100 years ago, the healthcare system is recognized around the world for its pediatric and adult Level One Trauma program as well as the only state-accredited Level Two Adult Trauma Center in Pinellas County. It is the home of the nation’s largest neonatal intensive care unit under one roof, the only system in the southeast to offer open fetal surgery to repair the most severe forms of spina bifida, the site of an Olympic athlete training facility and operator of one of the largest and highest performing clinically integrated networks in the region. Orlando Health is a statutory teaching system that pioneers

life-changing medical research. The 3,200-bed system includes 15 wholly-owned hospitals and emergency departments; rehabilitation services, cancer and heart institutes, imaging and laboratory services, wound care centers, physician offices for adults and pediatrics, skilled nursing facilities, an in-patient behavioral health facility, home healthcare services in partnership with LHC Group, and urgent care centers in partnership with CareSpot Urgent Care. Nearly 4,200 physicians, representing more than 80 medical specialties and subspecialties have privileges across the Orlando Health system, which employs nearly 22,000 team members. In FY20, Orlando Health served nearly 150,000 inpatients and nearly 3.1 million outpatients. During that same time period, Orlando Health provided approximately \$760 million in total value to the communities it serves in the form of charity care, community benefit programs and services, community building activities and more. Additional information can be found at <http://www.orlandohealth.com>, or follow us on LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter @orlandohealth.