

What has been “learned” in 2014 for metastatic breast cancer?

Prof Arlene Chan, Medical Oncologist, spoke at our PYNKS Meeting on the 7 February 2015. Points covered:

- Putting the evidence into practice
- Providing access
- Evaluating ALL aspects of a patient’s need
- Researching the priorities
- Funding the priorities

The components to improving outcomes in metastatic breast cancer include:

- Drug therapy.
- The biology of cancer.
- Optimising standard of care.
- Benefits of non-drug clinical trials.
- Ensuring supportive care for the patient, as it is integral.

Prof Chan advised they can be achieved by:

- High quality and relevant research.
- A dissemination of results.
- And putting these results into clinical practice.

Breast Cancer Research Centre-WA is unique in that we are:

- Clinician founded.
- Clinician driven.
- We conduct large international trials.
- We design patient relevant research .
- We educate, support and provide a multidisciplinary service.

Since 2000 we’ve had 936 patients entered into 57 trials here in the BCTU (Breast Clinical Trials Unit). This has allowed access to new drugs, funding for tests and increased contact staff for follow-up. From these trials, 163 patients received a 50% higher chance of cure. We had the highest recruitment globally with 435 patients in 12 trials accessing new drugs that were unavailable to other patients.

DRUG THERAPY

The process of identifying effective drugs begin with evaluation in the laboratory-in petrie dishes and early animal studies. Then potentially effective drugs are evaluated in humans with cancer to confirm effectiveness and safety. The next step is to assess these drugs in large randomised trials - the randomisation and large number of patients allows any observed cancer shrinkage to be attributable to the drug and not ‘by chance’. Once a drug is proven to be effective - this process from first discovery to proof of



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effectiveness usually takes 7-10 years - the drug then needs to be registered in a particular country and this generally leads to the drug being reimbursed (in Australia, this latter aspect can take 1-2 years). The above process of drug development and registration is largely under the control of pharmaceutical companies and generally cannot be accelerated by other parties, although clinical trial involvement will enable patients to get access to potentially effective drugs earlier.

CLINICAL TRIALS

The drugs evaluated in clinical trial are provided free. In some trials, all patients who are entered onto the trial receive the new drug; whilst in randomised controlled trials, each patient has a 1 in 2 or 2 in 3 chance of receiving the trial drug. Being involved in a clinical trial, also ensures that patients receive the most up-to-date management, can potentially increase the survival of some patients and contributes to the future care of other women and men diagnosed with breast cancer.

BCRC-WA: WHAT ARE WE DOING?

The following are examples of the kind of research projects that have been initiated within BCRC-WA:

- #BCRC107 - Does breast cancer cells change when they recur as metastases? We studied 157 patients and showed a 99% concordance in HER2 receptor status.
- #BCRC106 - DNA repair is abnormal in triple negative breast cancer - we studied whether we can identify which chemotherapy drugs can cause further damage? We plan to study 317 patients to analyse the genetic makeup of triple negative breast cancer.
- #BCRC111 - Do immune cells in the breast help or hinder cancer cell growth?
- #BCRC103 - Can careful monitoring after the first of cycle chemotherapy be used to give selected patients' immune support? Previous studies have shown that patients need to receive at least 85% of planned chemotherapy doses to obtain the benefit of improved survival. We studied 1655 patients using a standard approach of monitoring and this allowed between 91%-96% patients to receive >85% of planned chemotherapy doses and the average dosing delivered was 98%.

NON-DRUG CLINICAL RESEARCH

Some of the common side effects for treatment of breast cancer include:

- Fatigue

- Sore joints
- Weepy eyes

These are problems which are not frequently researched. Current BCRC-WA trials that are investigating these symptoms include:

- #BCRC110 AREA - A 2-phase exercise trial to assess fatigue in metastatic breast cancer and evaluate the benefits of a structured exercise program.
- #BCRC102 JUST - (Joints under study) A study of 75 patients using topical emu oil versus placebo oil to treat the stiffness and achiness which commonly occur in patients receiving an aromatase inhibitor drug.
- #BCRC108 - How common is tearing with chemotherapy and is it due to blocked tear duct? We studied 100 patients and showed that there is no need to stent the duct and that the symptom is reversible.
- #BCRC105 PATIPSA - Evaluating how many 'unplanned' visits patients have during chemotherapy and how often their GP is involved to see if greater GP training and education is necessary.
- #BCRC114 PPSS - (Physical and Psychosocial Survivorship Study). There is no information to assess the frequency and severity of a breast cancer diagnosis on psychological, employment and relationship problems. We plan to conduct this study to identify the prevalence and nature of these issues in breast cancer survivors.

Hair loss is a major concern with chemotherapy-do cold caps work and is it safe?

- Propose #BCRC113 - Cold cap study which will include women with early and metastatic breast cancer planned for chemotherapy to assess whether there is a difference between different chemotherapy drugs used and also the safety by having long term follow-up.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP?

- Participate in clinical trial if offered.
- Seek evidence-based information.
- Form practical partnership with BCRC-WA.
- Funding – General, Education (Newsletter, GP education, Trainees) and Project-specific (Survivorship study and Cold caps study).
- Donations are welcomed to BCRC-WA to continue our research, clinical trials and support services. Information can be found at www.bcrc-wa.com.au or email info@bcrc-wa.com.au