

Media release

Bern, 8 November 2018 / mk

Inselspital offers a new form of therapy for leukemia and lymphoma

On 22 October 2018, an innovative new immunotherapy was approved in Switzerland for the treatment of relapses of acute leukemias and lymphomas. Since this week, the Inselspital is the first hospital in Switzerland to be able to offer this new treatment.

A milestone in cancer therapy: For the first time, patients in Switzerland who suffer from relapsed acute lymphoblastic leukemia or malignant lymphomas can receive a personalized form of immunotherapy. Since approval on 22 October 2018, the Inselspital is the first center in Switzerland to be able to offer this new therapy. The treatment is restricted to young adults with relapsed acute lymphoblastic leukemias and adults with relapsed and refractory aggressive lymphomas.

Fighting cancer with your own immune system

"Previous immunotherapies stimulate the body's own defenses which is not particularly targeted," explains PD Dr. med. Urban Novak from the Inselspital. "The new therapy enables the patient's immune cells to recognize and destroy tumor cells. This takes us a step closer to a precise and truly personalized treatment."

The malignant cells of these patients are resistant to most of the treatments currently used against cancer. This explains the high expectations on this new treatment strategy. The CAR-T therapy utilizes the body's own modified immune cells (so-called CAR-T cells). These cells are taken from the patient, genetically engineered outside the body to enable them to attack the cancer cells and retransfused.

A center with considerable experience

By applying the first approved "living drug", the Inselspital is entering groundbreaking territory. Only a few clinics around the world have used it in studies. The manufacturer has chosen to gradually introduce the treatment in Switzerland in a limited number of cancer centers that are very experienced in treating leukemias and lymphoma. At the Inselspital in Bern, the Department of Medical Oncology and the Department of Hematology and Central Hematological Laboratory will jointly be conducting the CAR-T collection, transfusion and treatment.

Because the drug is currently administered in an inpatient setting, the multidisciplinary teams can respond quickly if there are signs of side effects. These may include an overreaction of the immune system, temporary neurological failures or infections. Cancer therapies are often extremely strenuous for the patient, and as a rule they are only used in cases where the benefits clearly outweigh the potential risks.

Research for more targeted cancer therapies

The Inselspital is highly committed to the research of immunotherapy against cancer. In work that has been underway since 2003 under Head Physician and Director of the Department of Medical Oncology, Prof. Dr. Med. Adrian Ochsenbein, the oncological team has been researching potential new approaches in the treatment of leukemia in a laboratory specialized for tumor immunology. Currently the Inselspital is also the only Swiss center participating in an international study examining the potential of another CAR-T cell construct for treatment of relapsed aggressive lymphomas.

Immunotherapy for leukemia, lymphoma and solid tumors, the personalized and targeted treatment of cancer are all important research priorities at the University Cancer Center (Tumorzentrum Bern). The Inselspital is the largest center for autologous stem-cell transplantation in Switzerland. This area of focus is being consistently advanced with the new CAR-T therapy.

Media information:

PD. Dr. med. Urban Novak, Chief Physician, Department of Medical Oncology, Tumorzentrum Bern, Inselspital, University Hospital Bern

Contact: kommunikation@insel.ch, +41 31 632 79 25.

*Inquiries regarding the assignment of patients: onkologie@insel.ch
(recurrent leukemia 18-25 years, recurrent lymphoma in adults)*

Competence Center for Cancer Therapy at Inselspital Bern

Tumorzentrum Bern – also known as the University Cancer Center Inselspital (UCI) – offers comprehensive advice, treatment and care to cancer patients and their relatives. Thanks to the cooperation of highly qualified experts from all disciplines, optimal care is ensured at all stages of cancer therapy.

The interdisciplinary Tumor Boards form a central element of treatment. All the involved experts jointly discuss treatment options and determine the best possible therapy in consultation with the patients. Support includes therapy for pain and physiotherapy, palliative care or psychological and pastoral care as part of the comprehensive offer for patients. Tumorzentrum Bern also focuses on further developing existing treatment options for various tumor-based conditions. As such it is involved in research at both the national and international levels.