

Therapy has my cancer on the run

Tom Whipple Science Editor

One of the first British patients to receive a revolutionary immunotherapy treatment has said that the drug has his cancer "on the run".

Mike Simpson, 62, is among the first wave of NHS patients to benefit from Car-T cell therapy, which uses genetic engineering to reprogramme the body's own immune cells to fight cancer.

He was diagnosed with a blood cancer in 2015 and told that he had less than two years to live at the end of 2018. After the new treatment, however, which began in February, he told the BBC that he was optimistic that he would beat it.

"If this treatment wasn't offered to me, I'd be saying goodbye in a relatively short period of time," he said, after tests showed the cancer was in abeyance. "I feel the treatment really is being effective, that we've got the cancer pretty much on the run."

It will still be some time before doc-

tors can be certain whether or not it has saved his life.

Up to 200 patients a year like Mr Simpson could benefit from the therapy. The NHS was one of the first health services to authorise the use of Car-T therapy, which is extremely expensive



Mike Simpson was given two years to live but his cancer is in abeyance

— with a list price of £280,000 per patient — but considered the cutting edge of cancer care, especially for blood cancers.

It works by taking blood out of the patient, then inserting genetic material into immune cells so that they can spot and fight the cancer. These cells are then multiplied before being injected back into the patient. The first NHS

patient to receive it was Yuwan Thakkar, 11, who has a form of leukaemia. In clinical trials, the approach has been shown to work on otherwise untreatable cancers, providing a "fourth pillar" to oncology — augmenting chemotherapy, surgery and radiotherapy.

These trials have shown that 40 per cent of patients had all signs of their otherwise untreatable, terminal lymphoma eliminated from their body 15 months after treatment.

When its approval was announced Simon Stevens, the NHS England chief executive, said: "Car-T therapy is a true game changer, and NHS cancer patients are now going to be amongst the first in the world to benefit."

Victoria Potter, consultant haematologist at King's College Hospital, told the BBC: "It gives new hope to a lot of our patients. It's amazing to be able to see these people, who you may have not been able to give any hope to, actually achieving remission. And that is a situation we have never seen before."

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