

Vitamin C treatment shows cancer promise

By Sophia Maines

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As Sandy Kellar battles ovarian cancer, she's noticing an unusual vitality in herself that she doesn't see in others with the disease.

"I can be a grandma and play with those grandkids in the backyard and anything I want," the Overland Park resident said.

Kellar attributes her energy to her twice-weekly intravenous vitamin C treatments, a therapy that is gaining followers and spurring new research, including a trial at Kansas University Medical Center.

Jeanne Drisko, medical director for the KU Medical Center's Program in Integrative Medicine, is in the process of completing a multiyear, \$375,000 trial of intravenous vitamin C in ovarian cancer patients. The study is funded by the Cancer Treatment Research Foundation, a nonprofit agency based in Schaumburg, Ill.

The study began in 2002 and enrolled its last patient in 2005. Women in the trial were given doses of vitamin C intravenously twice a week while also undergoing conventional chemotherapy treatment. Drisko declined to discuss the results until the trial is complete, but she said the therapy is safe.

"We haven't had any adverse events," she said. "We're encouraged enough that we're continuing."

Once championed by Nobel Laureate Linus Pauling, vitamin C as a cancer treatment suffered a setback in the 1970s when the Mayo Clinic studied orally ingested vitamin C pills and found no effect on cancer patients, Drisko said.

"Everyone thought, 'This is the definitive study,'" she said of the Mayo Clinic's research.

But vitamin C pills are different from intravenous vitamin C.

"When you give it by vein, it's like a drug," Drisko said. "When you give it by mouth, it's just a vitamin."

When vitamin C — also called ascorbate — is administered by vein in high doses, it generates hydrogen peroxide in the cellular areas, Drisko said.

“The machinery of a cancer cell is different,” Drisko said. “That machinery is particularly susceptible to being knocked off by hydrogen peroxide. . . . What’s exciting about this is that normal cells are completely unharmed. ”

Drisko in 1997 trained with Hugh Riordan, the late physician and founder of the Center for the Improvement of Human Functioning International in Wichita.

Riordan, influenced by Pauling’s work, and others at the center treated thousands of patients with vitamin C therapy, with varying results, said Chad Krier, physician with the Wichita center.

“We think it’s got promise,” Krier said. “I think we all have to be open-minded about it.”

Those studying the therapy say more research needs to be done. But many are encouraged by the findings of researcher Mark Levine, of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, who has found that vitamin C can work as a treatment.

Drisko, recently named the Hugh D. Riordan Professor of Orthomolecular Medicine at KU Medical Center, said the research was in its infancy, but she believes the findings show promise. She is planning additional studies.

And Kellar, 62, continues to endorse the benefits of the treatment she receives alongside those in Drisko’s study. She pays the \$200 weekly costs for two treatments.

Cancer for her is a bump in the road, and she wants to do all she can to get through the ordeal. When vitamin C therapy was suggested, she did the research and determined the therapy wouldn’t hurt and could make a difference.

“I knew I wasn’t going to do anything toxic to my body,” she said. “There was really nothing except finances that you would lose.”