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Perth husband and wife research team discover treatment for rare and deadly eye cancer

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Stacey and Walter Charteris with their children Joshua (14), Erin (6) and Phoenix (4). Credit: Ross Swanborough/The West Australian



A Perth husband and wife research team may have found a new way to treat a rare and deadly eye cancer – a breakthrough one patient hopes will buy people important “time with their families.”

Australia has the highest rate in the world of the deadly cancer, melanoma.

But those who do have a slim chance of survival, warned Professor Jonas Nilsson, chair of Melanoma Discovery at Perth's Harry Perkins Institute of Medical Research.

“Surgery or radiation have been the main forms of treatment of eye melanoma and early detection improves long term survival but for 50 per cent of patients the cancer spreads to the liver,” Professor Nilsson said.

“Once the cancer has spread, eye melanoma has a very quick and high mortality rate. For this group there are no effective treatments.”

However, this could soon change.

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Along with researchers at the University of Gothenburg – including his wife Lisa Nilsson – Professor Nilsson has been conducting vital research to help fight the cancer.

The team combined immunotherapy with Entinostat, a synthetic drug which potently and selectively inhibits certain enzymes and tumour cell growth.

“The combination of immunotherapy, which boosts a patient’s own immune system, and Entinostat showed potent killing of uveal melanoma cell lines,” Professor Nilsson said.

“We now have results of a trial that involved patients with metastatic cancer where some had very good outcomes and are still living after three years.”

Research on the innovative new treatment will continue in Perth.

For patients with this disease, any breakthroughs are welcome.

Perth mother of three Stacey Charteris has already lost an eye to a rare cancer. She is currently on Tebentafusp – a different immunotherapy drug that treats ocular melanoma – but welcomed the Swedish team’s breakthrough.

 Stacey and Walter Charteris with their children Joshua (14), Erin (6) and Phoenix (4). Credit: Ross Swanborough/The West Australian

“It gives me hope that there are amazing doctors – I call them the rock stars – giving people like me amazing chances to live a normal life,” she said.

“There is no standard treatment for this kind of cancer. So when there are breakthroughs it really matters.”

Mrs Charteris was diagnosed with ocular melanoma when she was 16 weeks pregnant with her son Phoenix. Afraid of what radiotherapy could do to her unborn baby, she had surgery to remove the eye at 20 weeks.

In December 2020, she was devastated to find out cancer had spread to her liver.

Mrs Charteris went to Sydney earlier this month to receive the Tebentafusp treatment, which works by helping immune cells get close enough to the cancer cells to attack them.

The mum of three returned to WA with just half an hour before NSW was slammed with “extreme risk” restrictions. She will continue to receive the treatment in Perth.

“I was very relieved to get home,” she said.

“I can’t wait to see the kids when I get out of quarantine – we’re counting down the days.

“That’s what these new treatments are all about, buying more time with my family.”

Family and friends are [raising money to help the Charteris family](#).

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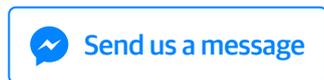
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