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By Rachel Thomas 1 June 2017

Glowing Tumours Help Patients' Odds

It was by chance that Alice Chambers' brain tumour was found.

The 33-year-old was loading the boot of her jeep when the window slammed down on her head so hard "I thought someone had hit me with a baseball bat". Days later, she noticed a broken blood vessel in her face, and decided to get it checked out, along with a small lump behind her eye.

Following a CT scan, her doctor phoned her with the message: "I'm really sorry, but they've found something".

"I sort of passed the phone to my dad and slid down the wall," she said.

Doctors had found an aggressive, malignant cancerous brain tumour known as a glioblastoma, on the right side of her head.

Two weeks ago, she became the first patient in New Zealand to be treated with a new drug that makes malignant brain tumours glow fluorescent during surgery.

The drug, Gliolan, turns tumours red while the brain mass remains blue, so the tumour can be removed down to macroscopic detail.

Before Gliolan, the average survival rate with treatment for people with standard glioblastomas was 14 months, Wellington Hospital neurosurgeon Kelvin Woon said. "I can say this in front of Alice, because I know it's not going to be that [short] now.

"We got all of the macroscopic tumour out. And she has done very well from it."

Previously it had been hard for neurosurgeons to distinguish between brain tissue and the edge of the tumour. Not wanting to remove brain tissue, they often ended up leaving parts of the tumour behind.

“The more tumour you remove, the better the outcome,” Woon said. “With a lower tumour burden, patients do better and live much longer, and that’s what we try to achieve.”

Chambers still needs to have chemotherapy and radiotherapy to blast any remnants of the tumour, which has turned out not to be as aggressive as first thought. The surgery has not cured her cancer, but she believes the work of Woon and Gliolan has prolonged her life.

“With the initial prognosis, the idea of never making it to 90 was the worst thing in the world.

“I was looking at my kids and knowing they’re 3 and 6 and thinking, if I’m dead in 15 months that’s 4 and 7. That’s never ever going to be old enough. You can’t leave them in the world at that age.

“I can only hope the worst is behind me, and I’ve got to look forward now and go about my life, and keep going.”

A recent Pharmac decision means Gliolan will be available to all district health boards through public funding from June 1. Woon applied to MedSafe to have it made available in 2015, and said the recent Pharmac approval was “fantastic for New Zealand”.

He estimated about 70 per cent of patients with these particular tumours would be suitable for Gliolan treatment.