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National [Healthcare](#)

This deadly cancer is often mistaken for a UTI. But doctors are hopeful about a new treatment



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A new treatment for bladder cancer is being rolled out across Australian hospitals, with doctors hopeful the approach will improve survival rates for the deadly disease.

The treatment involves two affordable chemotherapy drugs that have previously been ineffective on their own. However, when the drugs are combined, they offer a lifeline to patients with aggressive cancer on the lining of their bladders who have exhausted other options.



Alan Feher benefited from a new treatment for bladder cancer and is now in remission LUIS ENRIQUE ASCUI

“Until now, we haven’t really had any options for those patients, aside from removing their bladder, if they were fit enough for surgery,” said Associate Professor Weranja Ranasinghe, from the Urological Society of Australia and New Zealand.

Those unfit for surgery were put into palliative care.

While medical advancements, prevention and early detection have improved survival rates for most cancers in Australia, the life expectancy for bladder cancer patients has declined in the past 30 years and remains stubbornly low.

Just 57 per cent of people with bladder cancer live beyond five years of their diagnosis, compared with a 64 per cent survival rate in the period 1991-95.

Ranasinghe said these worsening statistics are likely due to an ageing population of people who have serious diseases such as heart or lung disease, which make them unsuitable for major surgery and chemotherapy, as well as a lack of new treatments.

In Victoria, the new treatment has been rolled out at health services such as Monash, Austin and Eastern Health, as well as the Royal Melbourne Hospital, Epworth, Cabrini and Waverley Private hospitals. In NSW, it is available at St Vincent’s and St Georges hospitals.

About 70 per cent of bladder cancer cases are confined to the lining of the bladder at the point of diagnosis. The survival rate reduces as the cancer progresses into the deeper muscle layers or spreads outside the bladder.

The standard treatment for aggressive cancers in the lining of the bladder is immunotherapy, which involves an inactive tuberculosis bacteria being injected into the bladder over six weeks.

However, between 30 and 50 per cent of patients do not respond to this treatment.

Ranasinghe said the new treatment, which involves administering two common chemotherapy drugs into the bladder, was successful for between 60 and 69 per cent of patients in this cohort. Patients also reported far fewer side effects.

“The success of this trial has changed the whole protocol for the treatment of bladder cancer,” he said.

The trial, which lasted two years, was conducted by Monash Health and involved 19 patients. It was based on a US study involving 276 patients with bladder cancer.

More than 3000 Australians are diagnosed with bladder cancer each year, and men aged over 50 are more likely to suffer from the disease. The most common symptom is blood in the urine.

In 2021, 773 men and 321 women died from the disease. But if detected early, the disease is largely curable.

Alan Feher was diagnosed with bladder cancer in 2020 after experiencing frequent urination and noticing some blood in his urine. Doctors had initially attributed his symptoms to an enlarged prostate.

“It was a shock,” the 72-year-old said of his diagnosis. Feher does not smoke and has not worked in a toxic environment – both risk factors for bladder cancer.

“Everyone’s aware of breast cancer and other major types of cancer, but I’d never thought about bladder cancer.”

After the standard immunotherapy treatment failed to treat the cancer, Feher was told that the next option would be removing his bladder and prostate.

“It was overwhelming. I didn’t think it was that serious.”

He then heard about the Monash trial and immediately signed up.

“There was no pain; the side effects for me have been minor,” he said. “It hasn’t come back. I am in remission. I am very happy that it has worked for me.”

BEAT Bladder Cancer Australia chief executive Adam Lynch welcomed the new treatment, saying he hoped it improved survival rates.

Lynch, who lost his wife Anna to bladder cancer in 2017 when she was in her mid-40s, said a diagnosis could be terrifying.

“Patients feel quite alone and they’re not always comfortable discussing their issues with family and friends,” he said.

In 2017, Christine La Rose was diagnosed with an invasive bladder cancer that had spread through her bladder wall. Her treatment involved the removal of her bladder and the surgical creation of a new bladder using part of her intestine.

La Rose, who works as the advocacy group’s patient and support lead, said the prognosis for women with bladder cancer was much worse than men because their symptoms were often dismissed as urinary tract infections.

“They’ll be given antibiotics and then maybe a couple of months later it will come back and then they’ll be given another course of antibiotics,” she said. “It might take six to 12 months for it to be diagnosed and then by that time the cancer has spread beyond the bladder.”

She said the most common symptoms were blood in the urine, the frequent and sudden need to urinate and unexplained urinary tract infections that don’t respond to antibiotics.

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