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New hope in treatment of childhood leukaemia

Zurich researchers have found a new treatment approach which they hope will help young leukaemia patients who don't respond to conventional therapies.

By combining available chemotherapeutic agents, great progress was achieved with the treatment of childhood leukaemia in the last 30-40 years, so that over 80 per cent of cases of acute lymphoblastic leukaemia (ALL), the most frequently occurring form of childhood leukaemia (up to 70 cases a year in Switzerland and up to 1,000 cases in Europe), can be cured. But there is still a sub-group of patients that are resistant to treatment, and modern treatment processes are still very long and hard for the affected youngsters.

A Zurich University Children's Hospital team conducted research around the resistance to treatment for ALL. Chemotherapy normally triggers the cancerous cells to commit suicide. But in patients with a resistance to this treatment this doesn't happen. The Zurich team investigated a substance called obatoclax mesylate and found that it had a positive effect. This has to do with

what is called programmed cell death. Cells can, in certain situations, induce their own suicides. This is absolutely critical for us to survive. If we have an infection, the virus will trigger the white blood cells to fight. They will proliferate to do the job, but then we have to get rid of them or we'll have leukaemia. A mechanism is in place to kill them; this is a programmed cell death, which triggers the system to clean the fragments of dead cell bodies away.

It was found that a low dose of obatoclax mesylate could influence the mechanism that controls programmed cell death, thus restoring the response to conventional anti-leukaemia drugs when given in combination.

It is hoped that within the next 18 months a small one-week treatment can be developed to treat patients with resistant leukaemia. However, it will take close collaboration between European and North American centres to develop the treatment further to achieve the best curative effect.

from swissinfo

LEUKAEMIA

Leukaemia is a cancer of the blood or bone marrow, characterised by an abnormal proliferation of white blood cells (leukocytes).

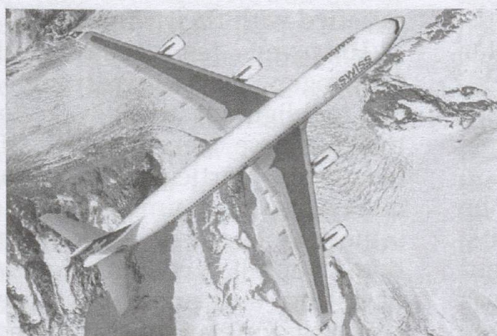
Acute leukaemia is characterised by the rapid increase of immature blood cells, which makes the bone marrow unable to produce healthy blood cells. Immediate treatment is needed as the rapid progression and accumulation of the malignant cells can spill over into the bloodstream and spread to other body organs.

Chronic leukaemia involves the excessive build up of relatively mature, but still abnormal, white blood cells. It can take time to progress and mostly occurs in older people.

Around 870 people are diagnosed with leukaemia in Switzerland annually, making up around 2% of all cancers. Almost half of those affected are 70 years old or over when diagnosed.

Acute leukaemia is the most common type of cancer among children.

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