New immunotherapy drug 'fast-tracked' for melanoma patients

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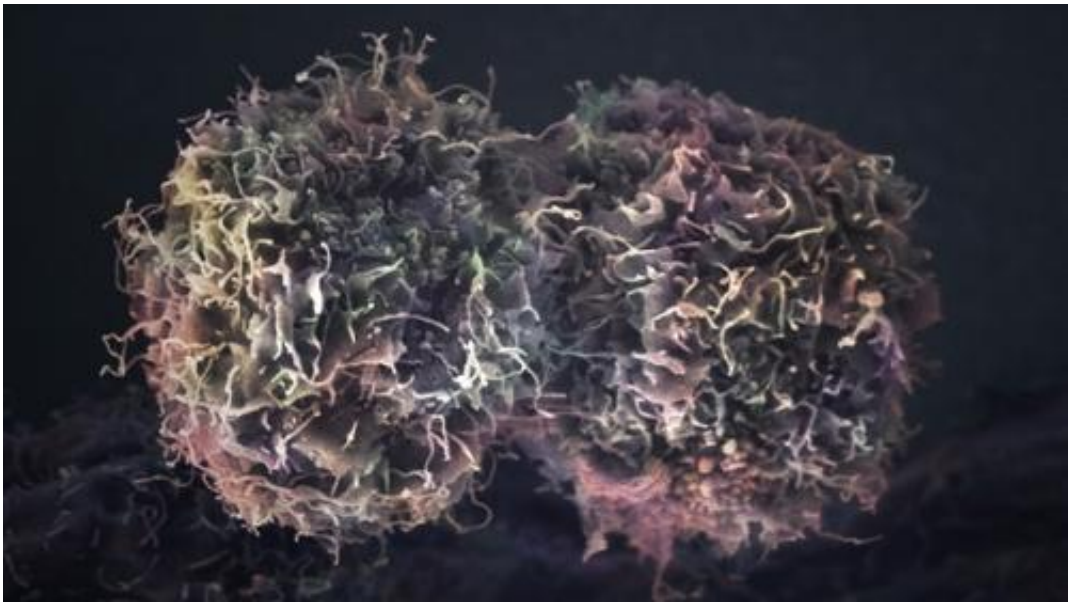

Skin cancer cell.

A new immunotherapy drug, pembrolizumab, has become the first treatment 'fast-tracked' for NHS patients with advanced melanoma, under a new Government scheme.

Clinical trials have shown that it has the potential to ease symptoms and extend survival.

The drug, also known as Keytruda, is the first to be signed off through

the Early Access to Medicines Scheme (EAMS), which aims to get pioneering drugs to severely ill patients much sooner.

Clinicians in the UK can now apply to prescribe the drug before normal European licensing procedures are complete, a process that can take years.

Immunotherapy drugs are showing considerable promise in clinical trials with cancer patients. They work by interfering with the way cancer cells use signals to hide from the body's immune system.

Some cancer cells send a message to the body's immune cells, which tricks them into thinking these are normal body cells. Pembrolizumab, which is an antibody, locks on to a molecule on the surface of the immune cells that receives these messages – called PD-1. It blocks the signal from getting through, allowing immune cells to recognise the disease once again.

Much of the research in understanding the role of PD-1 in cancer was carried out in the US.

However, a key step in the drug's development – developing the antibody into a form that doesn't itself get recognised and destroyed by the immune system – was carried out by UK scientists working for MRC Technology.

Dave Tapolczay, Chief Executive Officer of MRC Technology said: "We are very proud of our role in bringing this new cancer treatment to patients. Making Keytruda available under the Early Access to Medicines Scheme (EAMS) is another big step in getting healthcare innovation to patients sooner, and underlines our commitment to improving lives through science."

Pembrolizumab becomes the second immunotherapy for cancer approved in recent years, following the approval in 2012 of ipilimumab, also for melanoma. Studies suggest the two drugs could be even more effective in combination, potentially alongside radiotherapy.

Cancer Research UK head of policy, Emma Greenwood, said the announcement highlighted the great progress in developing immune treatments for cancer.

"It's encouraging to see it being made available to patients earlier. NICE and the Cancer Drugs Fund only look at licensed drugs, so it's a step in the right direction in terms of patients getting access to new treatments faster.

"With this approach, relevant data will be collected and patients are closely monitored. We look forward to seeing whether it can be replicated with other promising drugs," she added.

More information: "Radiation and dual checkpoint blockade activate non-redundant immune mechanisms in cancer." *Nature* (2015) DOI: 10.1038/nature14292

"Safety and Tumor Responses with Lambrolizumab (Anti–PD-1) in Melanoma." *N Engl J Med* 2013; 369:134-144July 11, 2013DOI: 10.1056/NEJMoa1305133

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