

TGen-Scottsdale Lincoln personalized therapy offers hope for patients with advanced cancer

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A new course of action—prescribing chemotherapy based on genetic research—has led to a Happy New Year for Phoenix resident Phil Zeblisky, an advanced Stage 4 pancreatic cancer patient who benefitted from a cutting-edge clinical trial, and now has no detectable cancer.

When Zeblisky was diagnosed in April with advanced metastatic [pancreatic ductal adenocarcinoma](#), or PDA, doctors offered little hope, telling him he perhaps had only months to live. Like other types of pancreatic cancer, PDA has virtually no symptoms until it reaches an advanced stage when it is difficult to treat.

Zeblisky and his wife, Kathy, kept looking for other options, and ultimately found medical oncologist Dr. Erkut Borazanci at the Virginia G. Piper Cancer Center Clinical Trials, a partnership of Scottsdale Lincoln Health Network and the Translational Genomics Research Institute, or TGen.

"Dr. Borazanci was the first one who took the time to talk in-depth about my cancer and why he thought the particular mix of drugs in the chemotherapy he would prescribe for me would have the best chance to succeed," he said.

Zeblisky was enthusiastic about the personalized approach to his treatment: "Dr. Borazanci's openness and willingness to spend as much

time as necessary talking with us, answering all of our questions, gave me a lot of confidence in him. That helped me decide to be part of his innovative approach to cancer fighting. It seemed to be the best option for me and to advance the science."

Zeblisky's individualized therapy was designed based on genetic research at TGen, a non-profit biomedical research center headquartered in Phoenix. He was placed on a combination therapy of Abraxane (nab-paclitaxel) and Gemcitabine, which because of previous studies at the TGen-Scottsdale Lincoln clinical trials, was approved in September 2013 by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) as a front-line therapy for advanced pancreatic cancer patients.

A third drug, Cisplatin, was added because of data gathered from studying patients tumors as part of TGen's Stand Up To Cancer (SU2C) pancreatic cancer dream team grant. Zeblisky was one of 10 patients in this unique clinical trial funded by the Scottsdale-based Seena Magowitz Foundation.

"Our partnerships with the Seena Magowitz Foundation and SU2C are generating positive results in the clinic, and we are confident of making even greater strides in the future on behalf of our patients," said Dr. Daniel D. Von Hoff, TGen's Distinguished Professor and Physician-In-Chief, and Chief Scientific Officer for the Piper Center clinical trials.

"We are finding that cancers are as individual as the humans who are affected by them," said Dr. Borazanci, who also is an adjunct faculty member at TGen. "We are learning that people with certain DNA profiles are more susceptible to certain kinds of cancers."

The best-known example of this, he noted, is the BRCA gene. When that gene mutates, it is more likely to cause breast cancer in women of Eastern European descent. The mutation has also been seen in pancreatic

cancer.

"BRCA-ness is just one example of a type of DNA genetic profile that can lead to cancer and then be targeted with specific chemotherapy mixes," Dr. Borazanci said. "There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of different drug combinations that need to be matched to cancer patients and tested in clinical trials."

Following six rounds of chemotherapy at the Piper Center, no trace of pancreatic cancer could be seen in any of Zeblisky's medical images. After two more rounds of the combination therapy, the absence of any detectable cancer was confirmed.

Zeblisky received maximum benefit from the original clinical trial, and now is in a follow-up clinical study funded through TGen's SU2C grant, testing the effectiveness of a maintenance therapy.

"The most surprising element of Phil's story," Dr. Borazanci said, "is that most patients with Stage 4 [pancreatic cancer](#) rarely live more than six months. Now, here it is almost a year after he was diagnosed, and he's feeling great and ready to return to work."

"It's amazing," said Zeblisky, 57, who has a new perspective on life and is looking forward to returning full-time to his job as a CPA with the Maricopa County Superior Court. "When you have a cancer diagnosis, the way you look at life totally changes. It really becomes a matter of 'carpe diem,' seize the day. So, I'm living my life much more in the moment than I did before. I wish everybody a Happy New Year. I think it would be wonderful if they could see life through fresh eyes. It's really great."

Best of all, Dr. Borazanci said, is that Zeblisky's experience is not unique. "Phil represents a new and growing group of patients with

cancers previously thought to be untreatable, who are now receiving benefit through participation in clinical trials. We urge people with cancer to consider the possibility of participating in a clinical trial. Only about 5 percent of people who are eligible for participation in clinical trials ever enroll in research studies.

"That's frustrating for us," he said, "because [clinical trials](#) offer opportunities for patients whose cancers have not been treated effectively through existing drug therapies."

"Patients should never give up hope," Zeblicky said. "Don't be afraid to obtain a second or, as in our case, a third opinion."

More information: Cancer patients who want to know more about clinical trials at the Virginia G. Piper Cancer Center can call 480-323-1339 or email an inquiry to clinicaltrials@shc.org.

Provided by The Translational Genomics Research Institute

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