

2016-02-15 Focus

CANCER BREAKTHROUGH

You'll remember little Layla Richards who had a very aggressive form of leukaemia and was given genetically engineered cells which succeeded in killing off the cancer cells when everything else had failed.

The story goes on. The Times says these genetically-modified immune cells "equipped with the blueprints for attacking tumours and infections" could survive in the blood for 14 years. Scientists describe the cells as a "living drug", able to prevent patients suffering a relapse.

Fiona Macrae, the Mail's Science Editor in Washington D.C. says that "two landmark studies have revealed the therapy's stunning potential. A revolutionary treatment that could stop cancer from ever coming back is close to becoming widely available. Dubbed a 'living drug', it will act in a similar way to a vaccine, by being constantly alert for the disease returning."

So this treatment may be 'like a vaccine that protects for life'. Its success so far is with 'liquid cancers' such as leukaemia. It could be used in solid tumours – but you've got to find a way of getting it there - and simply debulking the tumour surgically might be one weapon that could be used in these cases.

Fiona Macrae quotes Cancer Research UK's Dr Kat Arney who said it was an "exciting prospect". She stressed that it "doesn't yet work for all patients ... we still need more results from more trials ... but there's a lot of hope this type of therapy could save lives".

BIGGEST ANNUAL RISE IN DEATHS FOR ALMOST FIFTY YEARS

Prompts warnings of crisis in elderly care, says Laura Donnelly, Health Editor of The Telegraph ... adding "England and Wales show a five per cent increase in mortality rates in just one year."

She gives more details: "The year-on-year rise, to a total of 528,340 deaths, is the highest since 1968. There were more deaths last year than any year since 2003. Figures show that numbers of deaths have fallen steadily since the 70s, but that trend began to reverse in 2011. Public health experts last night said that when longer periods were examined, along with other factors – such as spikes in immigration of older people in the 1960s – the current trends appeared to be the worst since World War Two."

The problem has been blamed on the fact that the health service is in crisis, while social care services have been cut back. My view – one factor last winter was that the flu vaccine didn't work – and we GPs weren't told until long after the event. Flu vaccine is usually an excellent defence – but last winter was the exception and, although we docs could have been more vigilant had we been forewarned, keeping us in the dark put patients at risk.

LIVING LONGER

There's a book that tells you how to do it – and there is some evidence to back it. The book's called: "The Longevity Project: Surprising Discoveries For Health And Long Life" and it's by Dr Howard Friedman and Dr Leslie Martin. It's reviewed in the Mail by Louise Atkinson and she says: "Having a large social network, engaging in physical activities that naturally draw you in (rather than feeling obliged go to the gym), giving back to your community, enjoying your career and nurturing a happy marriage or close friendships can do more than add years to your life."

She quotes Dr Friedman: “Our society spends a fortune on fad diets, drugs and short-term remedies, but there is often disappointingly little effect on our longevity.” I imagine Dr Friedman would prefer us to spend a fortune on buying his book ... but, in fairness, it may well do us more good than the latest costly fad.

“ALZHEIMER'S

Wonder drug can stop disease in its track” said the Express in Apr 2015. Back in Feb 2013 the Express proclaimed that there was now a “Wonder drug to stop Alzheimer's.” Then, more recently – on 1st Jan 2016 – we read about a “Miracle jab to stop Alzheimer's” – a “Wonder vaccine.” And there are lots of other similar headlines.

Now the NHS Choices website picks up on yet another ‘cure.’ “Millions could be offered wonder drug to prevent Alzheimer's before symptoms appear,” is the overhyped headline in the Daily Express”. We’re told that the “wonder drug” in question, bexarotene, has only been tested in worms as part of this latest Alzheimer's research.

The NHS website explains that: “The main limitation of this study is it only provides very early-stage findings, which are so far in nerve cells and a short-lived worm model.” As worms are much simpler organisms than humans, the next step would be confirming these findings in creatures with very slightly more complex brains ... such as the ones that run the health service in Mid Essex. If these tests are successful then the way is clear to go a step up the evolutionary chain and experiment on mice – and only at that stage could one consider testing in humans.

So the claim in the Express is “premature.” I wonder if the newspaper’s Health Editor can remember that all the claims of ‘wonder drugs’ and ‘miracle cures’ made in the past have come to nothing. Could it be that she has Alzheimer's? Surely not!

MENTAL HEALTH

Following a damning report, the Prime Minister will announce almost a billion pounds of investment to enhance mental health services across the country ... we're told: “£290 million to provide specialist care to mums before and after having their babies + first ever waiting time targets to be introduced for teenagers with eating disorders and people experiencing psychosis + nearly £250 million for mental health services in hospital emergency departments + over £400 million to enable 24/7 treatment in communities as safe and effective alternative to hospital”. As I've said before many times, the mental health service in this area has been abysmal and no amount of reorganisations disguise that fact. Improvements are sorely needed – and only time will tell if this is too little, too late.

SOUTH WOODHAM

Has been hopelessly mismanaged by the NHS – look at how much better other new towns have fared – so it's good to see that three of the local practices overcame the difficulties placed in their way sufficiently well to win praise from their patients in the latest 'satisfaction poll.'

My staff did particularly well to partially overcome the major hurdle of a hopelessly inadequate budget. My accountant, who deals with a large number of GPs in the area, has just written to say: "You are my first client to have a pensionable loss!"

Incidentally, I note the top three practices in the area are all small ones – and these tend to be popular with patients as they usually offer a more personal service. They're not popular with the NHS, however – the smaller practices are being made to go bust on a regular basis.

As for The Practice, which was rated worst in the entire area, there have been rumblings for some time. You'll remember that when the contract originally went out to tender the old Mid-Essex PCT binned the SWF bids (behind closed doors) so as to engineer the appointment of a private company – thereby ensuring that taxpayers money would be siphoned out of SWF and put to a much better cause ... the CEO's Big Shiny New Car Fund. Nobody has ever been held accountable – not even the imaginary 'patient representative' who was supposed to have approved the deal.

The contract ended last summer. We were told back in 2014 by NHS employee Julie Bradshaw that the information on the tendering process would go out in early 2015 and the new 'management' would be appointed by the Autumn. When nothing happened the local practices wrote to enquire why? After all, this was an opportunity for the local practices to form a federation in order to bid to run The Practice in tandem with the patients ... and to ensure its budget went into patient care in SWF rather than have it taken out of the town and deposited in the coffers of a private company. Somebody called Cathy Galione, having ignored the GP's letters for some considerable time, eventually replied to let us know that a decision had been made behind closed doors (as usual) and that 'they' would, unilaterally and without any consultation with the local clinicians or the patients of The Practice, extend the contract – and, furthermore, she refused to show the local GPs the regulations upon which she claimed this decision was based. Clearly the words 'openness and transparency' have yet to find their way into her vocabulary ... as have the words 'Patient Choice' and 'No decision about me without me'. As I say, we despair at the way the NHS treats the residents of SWF. And, as ever, nobody is being held to account!

Dr John