

STAR OF TV AND RADIO

CHRIS TARRANT

ON WHY HE BACKS A REVOLUTIONARY BUT LITTLE-KNOWN CANCER TREATMENT

A few weeks ago I had just returned to the pavilion after batting in a charity cricket match. I hadn't even taken off my pads when someone I knew tapped me on the shoulder. He didn't apologise for gate-crashing my moments of relaxation after one of my better knocks. He was on a mission to grab my attention and tell me something that I now realise is hugely important for me - and you.

The man in question was David Longman, the director of new charity Killing Cancer. He went into his well-rehearsed speech, barely pausing for breath. He told me about a cancer treatment called PDT that I had never heard of. After a few minutes he made his exit having thrust a sheet of paper into my hands. I promised to read it later.

Driving home that night, I thought about his words. All my life I have tried to avoid cancer and any talk about it. Nobody likes to think about cancer, but just as this old friend turned up out of the blue, I was reminded that cancer pops up when you are least prepared.

I have no idea if I have cancer now. Few of us have any clue if we may have

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a few rogue cells dividing somewhere in our body. Often, we only find out when it is too late. We like to think that an annual health check will detect something, but I am now even more acutely aware that I have never had the sort of screening that I should have.

That was drummed home to me by one of the "lucky" cancer patients who has been treated with PDT, which stands for Photodynamic Therapy. I say lucky because Kim avoided surgery and radiotherapy and was treated successfully with this Cinderella cancer-killing therapy.

Kim told me how her skin cancer had probably been slowly cooking away inside her for years since her youth when the desire to get a tan was the only thought in her mind. At the age of 44 her tanning days caught up with her and, these days, her only tan comes from a bottle.

What was all the more staggering for Kim was that the GPs who had monitored her small area of flaky skin didn't tell her that it was likely to be so serious. In the end, it was a chance meeting with a locum, who after seeing the small area of problem skin told her that it needed to be treated immediately.

Cancer is something that can send shockwaves through us. We think the worst, and while many cancers are treatable these days, there is still a grossly inadequate level of awareness and knowledge of the many different treatment options available. That includes PDT.

Kim was due to have surgery for her skin cancer. Some patients in her

position need to have their entire nose removed, and then go through a process of facial reconstruction. This might be a modern miracle, but the harrowing detail makes me feel sick.

The most commonly promoted cancer treatments are chemotherapy and radiotherapy. Indeed, for many cancers they are the only option. We all know the side effects are gruesome, and they can take months to produce the desired results while the rest of our body breaks down under the stress of the chemical reactions taking place inside us.

Curious about PDT, I asked the research team at the National Medical Laser Centre (NMLC) at University College London - one of the pioneering research groups working with the treatment - what is so different about it. I was staggered by their answers.

PDT involves using a light-sensitive drug that is activated by a low-powered light. The treatment kills the cancer cells by knocking out the oxygen supply to them.

It can be used to treat many mouth, skin, head, neck and oesophageal cancers and pre-cancers - but only if your GP or oncologist know about it.

With PDT - in stark contrast to chemotherapy - you don't suffer skin burns, your hair doesn't fall out, and your white blood cells aren't destroyed, so your immune system stays intact and allows you to fight off all the bugs to which chemotherapy patients are vulnerable.

Also, PDT is designed to be selective and only zap cancer cells. If, by accident, some healthy cells are



Chris Tarrant OBE, 58, is an award-winning TV and radio broadcaster, best known for presenting *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* His wife Ingrid also works in TV and the couple have four children

destroyed, they re-grow within weeks. But that's not the only advantage. PDT can usually kill cancers in just a single treatment and, if a few cancer cells are missed, you are able to repeat the treatment. There is no real down side with PDT, although most patients are advised to stay in a darkened room for a few days after their treatment.

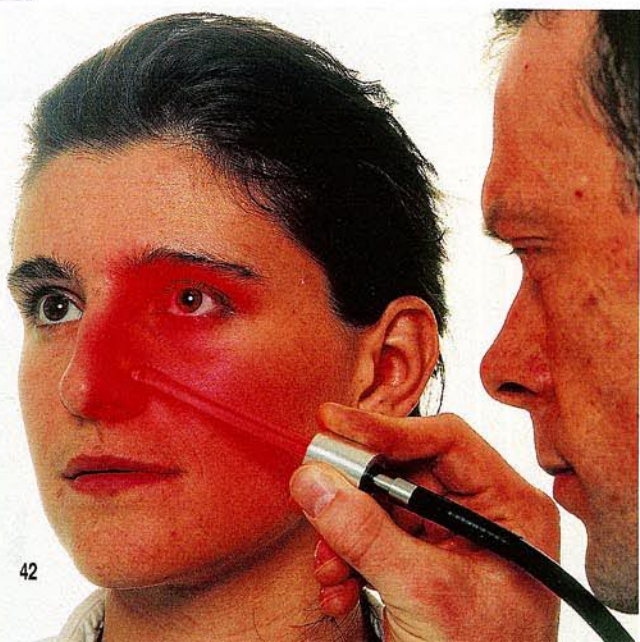
The medics at UCL, in tandem with many other research teams across the UK, are developing cancer treatments for the prostate and bile ducts, with some success.

With our financial support they want to continue their work with early lung cancer patients where the survival rates are already astonishing. They also hope to produce treatments for some of the deadliest forms of the disease including breast, pancreas and colon cancers.

I guess I am a prime candidate for a variety of cancers as a result of some of my vices and love of the outdoors. Just a day after meeting Kim and hearing her story, I got a call from one of my fishing friends. He told me he had cancer - a skin cancer just like Kim's. It was really rather spooky to realise that I could help steer my buddy towards PDT and a treatment that could change his life.

I know one thing for certain. If the Big C ever visits me and mine, I hope that the medical team at NMLC will have a treatment ready. That's why I hope you'll join me in doing what you can to help promote and develop the PDT option.

Ray of light: PDT uses a drug that is activated by a low-powered light (left) and kills cancer cells by cutting off their oxygen supply. TV star Chris is committed to the PDT cause after meeting Kim (below) who beat skin cancer without surgery or gruelling chemotherapy



To join the Killing Cancer campaign, and for further information on PDT, visit www.killingcancer.co.uk.

PHOTOS: DAVID LONGMAN, DAVID PARKER/SCIENCE PHOTO LIBRARY, REK FEATURES