

THE GENTLE WAY TO TREAT CANCER

Most cancer patients – and their doctors – have never even heard of photodynamic therapy. But this NHS treatment can actually replace surgery or chemotherapy



Name: Kim Wuyts
Age: 44
From: Worthing, West Sussex
Problem: skin cancer
Solution: photodynamic therapy (PDT)

When Kim Wuyts looked at her face in the mirror three years ago she noticed a tiny flaky area of skin the size of a pinhead on the tip of her nose.

'The area wasn't itchy or painful but it peeled, bled a bit and healed. Then the cycle repeated itself,' she says.

Kim consulted a doctor and after a tiny sample of the skin was taken and analysed she was diagnosed as having basal cell carcinoma, a type of skin cancer.

Kim was terrified by the word 'cancer' – although she didn't have the most serious type of the disease.

'The treatment options given to me were surgery or



Basal cell carcinoma

radiotherapy,' she recalls. 'I decided on surgery to remove the cancerous skin and replace it with healthy skin from behind my ear. But I was worried about how my nose would look.'

Kim talked to a friend who'd had a similar problem. She suggested a little-known treatment for cancer known as photodynamic therapy (PDT).

Kim decided to ask her GP about it.

'My doctor hadn't heard of it,' she says, 'but she was happy to refer me for treatment.'

Kim was sent to the National Medical Laser Centre in London, which specialises in PDT.

There she had treatment on the NHS. A drug was injected into her veins and a laser shone on to her nose for several minutes.

'My nose was tender and sore for about three

days afterwards but I didn't need painkillers,' she says.

The treatment was repeated four months later and Kim has now been given a clean bill of health.

'I'm touching wood but the cancer seems to have gone, my nose looks and feels normal and there's no scar,' she says. 'I wish more people knew about PDT. It's simpler and less invasive than conventional cancer treatment.'

Early detection

PDT is highly successful at treating certain cancers such as the form of skin cancer Kim had, and works best on small cancers that have been caught early.

However, PDT is unsuitable for treating certain cancers such as the form of skin cancer Kim had, and works best on small cancers that have been caught early. However, PDT is unsuitable for treating malignant melanoma, the most deadly form of skin cancer, and it can't treat cancers that have spread.

During PDT, a drug that makes cells sensitive to light is given to patients either as a cream for

superficial cancers) or an injection (for deeper ones).

Next, a special type of light – often from a laser – is targeted at the cancerous area for 20 minutes if cream has been applied or three minutes if the drug has been injected. In the case of internal cancers, light is delivered through a needle or fine, flexible tube inserted into the body.

A type of oxygen, called singlet oxygen, is produced in the illuminated tissue and kills it. The light is shone only on to cancerous cells, which are killed, while the healthy ones in the rest of the body are undisturbed.

Healthy cells replace the ones destroyed, and the cosmetic results are often perfect.

PDT has few side effects, though some of the drugs may cause nausea for a short time after treatment.

It's important to avoid sunlight and bright indoor lighting for several days or sometimes weeks after

PDT depending on the method and drug used.

PDT is so gentle because it works only in the area of the body where the drug is activated. The treated area heals quickly with little scarring.

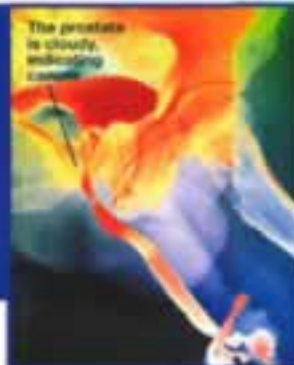
PDT doesn't cause weight gain or hair loss and can be used on its own or alongside other



Kim Wuyts after PDT

What can PDT treat?

- PDT works best on small, localised cancers (see 'Early detection', above) and has uses in other medical areas (see the box on 'PDT and your periods', above right).
- For skin cancers other than malignant melanoma PDT has a success rate of more than 90 per cent.
- It can also be used on mouth, head and neck cancers; lung cancer, if it's detected early enough; and to treat precancerous changes and early cancer in the oesophagus (gullet).
- PDT is showing promise as a treatment for cancer of the vulva, bladder lining and prostate (right).



The prostate is cloudy, enlarging cancer

PDT AND YOUR PERIODS

It's early days but research suggests that PDT could be used to relieve heavy periods.

During treatment a light-sensitive drug is injected through the cervix, and after a couple of hours light is directed at the womb lining via a tiny tube also inserted through the cervix. This destroys the womb lining and so can obstruct menstrual bleeding each month.

PDT may also be a suitable treatment for adenomyosis, a condition in which deposits from the womb lining get into the muscular womb wall resulting in painful and heavy periods.

treatments, it's often done on an outpatient basis.

Doctors are currently reluctant to recommend PDT as it's so new – and many, like Kim's, haven't heard of it.

But a new charity called Killing Cancer is dedicated to making PDT an easily obtainable, well known treatment option.

For more information go to www.killingcancer.co.uk.

Mary-Claire Mason