

Game-Changer for Melanoma Treatment



The FDA has approved a drug for the treatment of advanced melanoma. Pembrolizumab, which goes by the brand name Keytruda, is expected to be a game-changing drug for treating patients with advanced melanoma and who are no longer responding to alternative treatments. It is developed by Merck & Co.

Keytruda is an immunotherapy drug that attacks PD-1, a protein that interferes with the effectiveness of the immune system. Keytruda targets this protein and encourages immune cells to attack cancer cells. This mode of action is what sets Keytruda apart from previous therapeutic options and that is why it is considered to be a breakthrough in melanoma treatment.

Keytruda has received a fast-track approval from the FDA and this approval is based on the results of clinical trials conducted by Dr. Antoni Ribas of UCLA and his colleagues. The drug has been tested on more than 600 patients.

Two studies were conducted to test the drug. One study comprised of 173 patients who were prescribed either two mg/kg of Keytruda or 10mg/kg of the drug. The results showed that nearly 24 percent of patients who received the new drug experienced tumour shrinkage of more than 30 percent while only a small percentage of patients given the 10mg/kg dose had tumour shrinkage. None of the patients experienced any regrowth in the tumour and the effects of Keytruda remained for at least 1.4 to 8.5 months, if not longer.

The second study was conducted with 411 patients to test the safety of Keytruda. The results showed that severe side effects such as problems with the lung, colon and liver were rare. The most common side effects observed during the study were fatigue, cough, nausea, rash, itchy skin, reduced appetite, diarrhoea, constipation and joint pain.

According to Dr. Ribas, "This drug is a game changer, a very significant advance in the treatment of melanoma. For patients who have not responded to prior therapies, this drug now provides a very real chance to shrink their tumours and the hope of a lasting response to treatment."

A case study of 74-year old Tom Stutz highlights the effectiveness of the new drug. He had been diagnosed with advanced melanoma and the cancer had spread to his lung, liver and other areas. He was on oxygen and unable to walk. His chances of survival appeared to be very low but when he was prescribed Keytruda, his tumours shrunk by 90 percent and halted regrowth. Now, Stutz is off oxygen and able to walk.

Dr. Ribas believes that there is a possibility that Keytruda could be used to treat other cancers such as lung, bladder, head and neck cancers.

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