UCSF Clinical Trials Lead to New Hope for Melanoma Patients

An array of leading-edge trials, coupled with the myriad resources of the Bay Area’s only NCI-designated comprehensive cancer center, bring forth new and revolutionary treatments for melanoma.

NINE MONTHS AFTER beginning combination drug therapy in early-phase clinical trials at UCSF, advanced-stage melanoma patient Shannon Jimerson received news that every cancer patient longs to hear. “You have very minimal disease left,” said Alain Algazi, MD, an oncologist and skin cancer specialist at the Melanoma Center of the UCSF Helen Diller Family Comprehensive Cancer Center. In fact, Jimerson’s tumors had shrunk by an astonishing 85 percent.

Jimerson, whose tumors were pervasive before the trial, was scheduled for a biopsy two weeks after she started taking the investigational drugs. “By the time I got there, there was nothing to biopsy,” said Jimerson, the mother of two young girls. “It was an absolute miracle, this drug.”

In addition to this trial, there are at least 10 melanoma clinical trials underway at any given time at UCSF — more than any other institution in Northern California. These trials not only lay the groundwork for future treatments, but also play a key role in caring for patients today.

“It’s much more difficult to provide good care without clinical trials,” said Daud. “There’s been so much development in the FDA-approved agents, but they are just the tip of the iceberg.” UCSF researchers’ next challenge: discovering what other pathways exist and developing the drugs to block them.

Clinical trials make up an integral part of the multidisciplinary approach taken by the UCSF Melanoma Center. In addition to 10 physicians devoted exclusively to melanoma, the UCSF Helen Diller Family Comprehensive Cancer Center is home to many of the nation’s top experts in dermatopathology and genetic analysis, whose findings lay the foundation for developing the most effective, personalized treatment for each patient.

For Jimerson, the trial and the care she receives provide hope for the future. “It allows me to live my life,” she said. “Kids know I have cancer, but cancer isn’t the focal point of our lives.”

“A year or two ago, melanoma treatment wasn’t like it is in this moment.” – Adil Daud, MD

Today, 14 years after the FDA authorized Zelboraf to treat melanoma, two new drugs approved last year are providing hope to Jimerson and others who have a genetic mutation found in approximately half of melanoma cases. Like Zelboraf, which targets and inhibits the genetic mutation known as BRAF V600E, the two oral drugs being developed today by GlaxoSmithKline work on that same pathway, but also take aim at a second point on the path. The goal is for patients to stay disease-free longer by blocking the cancer’s pathway in two places.

“It’s like a river being blocked by two dams,” said Adil Daud, MD, director of the UCSF Melanoma Center and chief investigator for the trial. “Maybe you’ll overflow the first dam, but then the other part will take over.”

The UCSF Melanoma Center provides consultations and treatment for all stages of melanoma, from early lesions to late-stage disease. Newly diagnosed patients and those who have experienced a recurrence of melanoma receive a comprehensive evaluation, including a review of medical history, physical exam, pathology assessment of a biopsy specimen, psychosocial interview and recommendations for an individualized plan of treatment and follow-up.

Patients referred to the center for the first time are seen by Susana Ortiz-Urda, MD, a dermatologist and co-director of the UCSF Melanoma Center.

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For more information about melanoma clinical research at UCSF, contact Leslie Ziani at (415) 514-6256 or ziani@cc.ucsf.edu.

A scan of a cancer patient showing the extent of disease before treatment (left) and a marked improvement six weeks after beginning combination drug therapy (right).
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CLINICAL TRIALS

The UCSF Helen Diller Family Comprehensive Cancer Center conducts one of the nation’s largest cancer clinical trials programs, offering trials focusing on treatment, prevention, diagnosis, survivorship and quality of life. Many of these studies are only offered here.

Review our clinical trials database to find studies for which your patients may be eligible. Clinical trial availability changes frequently. Call or email so we can help identify the appropriate research staff to discuss clinical trials and eligibility criteria specific for your patient. To subscribe to a monthly email listing of open clinical trials, send your name and email address to clinicaltrialslist@ucsfmedctr.org.

Phone: (877) 827-3222
Email: communications@cc.ucsf.edu
Clinical trials database: www.cancer.ucsf.edu/trials

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