

Immunotherapy holds promise for cancer treatment

Immunotherapy, a relatively new cancer treatment that enlists the body's own immune system to fight cancer, is producing ever-improving results.



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Specialists are reporting that select cancer patients with vastly improved prognoses using immunotherapy when compared to radiation therapy and chemotherapy treatments. "The effect of immunotherapy seems to be very sustained. Previously in the melanoma space, after two years with chemo, we had lost all of our patients. With immunotherapy, as many as 60% of patients are still alive and have good quality of life," said Professor Alex Adjei, of the Department of Oncology at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester USA, told the European Society of Medical Oncology (ESMO) Summit 2020 in Cape Town recently.

Besides treating melanoma, immunotherapy is showing promise for lung cancer, where previously the prognosis was grim.

Regulation

However, all delegates stressed that more research was needed to determine why immunotherapy yielded results for some patients and not for others. Another area of interest was in international collaboration to accelerate research, to expand access and hasten licensing.

"Immunotherapy has changed the game. But we need better access. People need to be able to get it," said Dr Devan

Moodley of the Wits Donald Gordon Medical Centre.

Medicines regulatory authorities differ substantially in their resources, and effectiveness. The World Health Organisation (WHO) states that [fewer than one in six](#) of its member states have well-developed drug regulation.

International collaboration in developing and approving immunotherapy drugs, and harmonising regulatory guidelines could hasten their introduction to the market. In South Africa, immunotherapy has only recently been approved for the treatment of lung cancer and melanoma.

Accessibility

“There has to be a global movement for price reform,” said Adjei, calling for governments to work together. “The government of one country (alone) can’t make a difference.”

Dr Caroline Robert from the Institut Gustave Roussy, France, echoed this opinion. “Drugs are not accessible in the same way in different countries. The other issue is around accessibility and approvals. It’s mostly a political problem.”

“We’ve made a big breakthrough with immunotherapy, but it’s still relatively early in the journey,” said Adjei, on the future prospects for cancer treatment.

“We might be able to eradicate cancer if we catch it early. But for most people, perhaps cancer will become like a chronic disease that you don’t quite get rid of, but where you are able to live with it.”

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