This vaccine returns the immune system to recognize and attack the prostate cancer cells.

Dr. Doug Thompson

A retired residential contractor became the first person in Burke County to receive a new therapy for prostate cancer at Blue Ridge HealthCare’s Cancer Center.

Eddie Wright of Morganton, who has late stage of the disease, was diagnosed with prostate cancer at Blue Ridge HealthCare’s Cancer Center. Eddie C. Wright of Morganton, was diagnosed with prostate cancer when his prostate-specific antigen (PSA) level rose to an alarming level.

The therapy, a recent addition to the cancer treatment options, is called "autologous cellular cancer treatment," is called the first-ever vaccine to stimulate the immune system by using white blood cells that are personalized to recognize and attack the prostate cancer cells.

Before getting his personalized dose of the therapy, Wright had to undergo a three-hour process of collecting his white blood cells called leukapheresis. He had blood drawn from one arm, processed to separate the white blood cells, and put back in the other arm. His cells were shipped to a Dendreon production facility in New Jersey and modified with a protein linked to an immune stimulating agent.

Wright’s treated white blood cells arrived back in North Carolina on Friday, July 8, at the Charlotte airport and were medically transported to the Cancer Center at Grace Hospital. After a one-hour intravenous (IV) infusion, Wright's first treatment was complete. It was the first in a series of three injections given about two weeks apart. Each treatment must take place two to three days after the white blood cells are collected.

"I'm just thankful to be here," Wright said. "I'm thankful they found the cancer when they did and are able to treat it here. I thank the Lord that everything's going well. I don't see how you could get better treatment anywhere else."

This therapy is designed to work differently from hormone therapy, radiation or chemotherapy, and Dr. Thompson said it doesn't have a lot of the side effects typically associated with chemotherapy. "We don't see low blood counts, hair loss or nausea and vomiting," he said. "Unfortunately, this therapy isn't a permanent fix."

The therapy, however, may improve overall survival rate by four months and is the only approved treatment shown to extend median survival beyond two years in certain men with advanced prostate cancer, according to studies listed on the PROVENGE website. It has been approved by Medicare.

"To some people that doesn't seem like a large amount of time," Dr. Thompson said. "But for some cancer therapies you sometimes see benefits only a few weeks. This is fairly dramatic when it comes to improved survival in patients with metastatic disease."

Men with prostate cancer must meet certain criteria and finding a place for white blood cell collection may include a trip to Charlotte or Durham, as in Wright's case. For now, the Cancer Center is the only hospital in the Unifour offering the therapy. Charlotte, Shelby, Winston-Salem and Johnson City, Tenn., are the closest facilities.

"It's much better to be able to do it here just a little bit of time on the road will really wear you out," Wright said. "And they people a little closer. You come in, get acquainted with them and they become part of your family."

"We're very, very happy to be able to offer this therapy to our patients," Travis Jones, social worker with the Cancer Center, who helps with patient assistance. "We hope to bring more therapies to Burke County to allow our patients more opportunities so they don't have to travel as much for cancer treatment."

A video featuring Mr. Wright and Dr. Thompson talking about the therapy has been posted on the Blue Ridge HealthCare channel on YouTube. For more information about cancer treatments offered at the Cancer Center, call 580-6536 or visit the website WhereHopeGrows.org.

CANCER CENTER AT BLUE RIDGE HEALTHCARE

Cancer Center now offering therapy to combat prostate cancer

Info on Prostate Cancer Treatment

About 218,000 men in the United States get prostate cancer each year and about 32,000 die, according to the American Cancer Society.

In many cases, the cancer is caught before it has spread beyond the prostate gland and can be cured with surgery or radiation therapy. If the cancer has spread, men usually are given drugs that suppress the body's production of the hormone testosterone, which can fuel tumor growth.

Provenge is a therapeutic vaccine that treats the cancer, as compared to a preventive vaccine, which prevents infectious disease. It is for cases in which men have late stage of the disease, metastatic, asymptomatic, hormone-refractory prostate cancer (HRPC), the disease has spread beyond the prostate gland and is no longer held in check by hormone therapy.

Before last year, only one drug had been shown to improve survival — docetaxel, which was approved in 2004.

As of 2011 there are two approved preventive vaccines which prevent the cancer-causing viruses human papillomavirus and hepatitis B virus.

Provenge, or Sipuleucel-T, was approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) on April 29, 2010. Medicare announced it would pay for the treatment on June 29, 2011.

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