

Clinical trial program develops research for West Michigan cancer patients

by Franque Thompson | Newschannel 3 Wednesday, June 5th 2019



GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. — Health professionals in Grand Rapids said their program helps discover promising cancer research for patients in West Michigan. The program, South Texas Accelerated Research Therapeutics (START) Midwest, is a drug development program that also offers clinical trials.

Health professionals said START Midwest was created to give patients and science some hope, in search of better treatments and a cure.

Dr. Mark Campbell, president of Cancer and Hematology Centers of West Michigan, said START Midwest is managed through the Grand Rapids facility. He explained START Midwest develops what are called anti-cancer drugs.

Campbell said the medications they design aim to improve the quality of life and survival of cancer patients.

“If we can just find that right drug, we can help cure a lot of people. That place of starting it is research the newest, latest and best drugs,” said Campbell. “We’re certainly trying to cure people.”

Campbell said START Midwest was created in Grand Rapids, so cancer patients wouldn’t have to travel to places like Detroit, Ann Arbor or Chicago to receive this kind of therapy. START Midwest is the first of its kind in West Michigan.

“We just want to make ourselves available to them, we want to make it convenient for them and we want to help get the right answer right here in West Michigan,” said Campbell.

A West Michigan woman named Marty is a patient at START Midwest. She said she’s participated in the clinical trials for about two months. Marty said she is optimistic about the clinical trials and drug development program benefiting her health.

“I know it’s going to get better. That’s all there is to it!” said Marty.

Marty was diagnosed with Peritoneal Cancer, a rare cancer of the stomach lining, almost a year ago. She said she had chemo therapy before starting clinical trials at START Midwest.

“It was a shock because I thought I was all fixed after my chemo and I wasn’t. And there’s not much that’s on my cancer, literature or anything,” said Marty. “After the chemo, they found this mass that was here and they couldn’t do anymore for it. They couldn’t operate, couldn’t give me chemo.”

She said she decided to take a chance at START Midwest to see if there's another option to treat her cancer. Campbell said clinical trial participants like Marty are their most common.

"They're undergoing therapy and maybe it's not working or it's not working as effective as we had hoped. And they're saying, 'Is there something else I can try?' And the answer, often, will be yes," said Campbell. "Giving them hope, giving them a way towards hope. They don't want false promises. But if they still feel that desire to fight on, they appreciate that you're available for them and you're willing to help come alongside and do that fight with them."

Campbell explained they collaborate with a cancer patient's doctors and health care systems, first. He said often times the patient's health care professionals would recommend them to START Midwest to see if its drug development trials could help treat their cancer.

"We're working with them to offer a drug that is not otherwise available," said Campbell. "We're not trying to give you something to just wear you down and make you worse. But, we're really trying to give you something that will really turn things around."

He said an important part of the research done at START Midwest deals with genomic testing. He explained genomic testing looks for gene alterations or harmful changes in a person's genetic code.

"Genomic testing so we know what's the specific characteristic of your tumor that seems to impart to it its malignant behavior. And if we can block that, correct that, reduce that, then maybe that will be the cure that we're looking for," said Campbell.

Campbell said blood and urine samples from the clinical trials are sent to pharmaceutical companies to test how the no-name drugs react to a patient's cancer.

“There’s a lot of science to validate the safety and effectiveness. And that all has to be done correctly and very thoroughly and only by Phase 1 units before it can go to the FDA for approval,” said Campbell.

Once approved by the FDA, Campbell said the drugs are distributed nationwide for cancer patients to use. He said those are breakthroughs in cancer research that cannot be done without the people.

“We need to get more people on study, so we can get these studies done quicker, to get the answers quicker and get them back out to the rest of people,” said Campbell.

Marty said contributing to research is another reason why she wanted to participate in the studies at START Midwest. She said since starting the program about two months ago, she’s had no side effects so far and is hopeful.

“And if it doesn’t work, well, I lived with the cancer for 56 years. If I can get 20 out of the stomach I’m good to go,” said Marty.

Campbell said there are about 15,000 new cancer cases each year in West Michigan. He said people who aren’t seeing results from other cancer therapies may want to consider START Midwest. Campbell explained they work mostly by recommendations from a patient’s doctor and health care system.