

Quest for the cure

Wife pushes for more stem-cell research in Canada

By JENNIFER DUNVILLE
dunville.jennifer@dailygleaner.com
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J.C. Haas ignores the pain as he lies stiffly on a hospital bed for his fourth injection of an experimental stem-cell treatment.

He gets excruciating headaches from the risky procedure.

But there's a big payoff for the father of three.

He's getting more time to play with his children because of the treatment, which repairs the parts of his brain destroyed by Machado Joseph Disease.

This is the second time J.C. and his wife Cherie have travelled 20 hours to China for the treatments, which cost more than \$30,000.

The Haases believe it's worth every penny.

Now they want it made available in Canada.

They plan to lobby for the cause as soon as they return to their home in Geary from this latest China trip.

While the Haases are keen about the treatment, Canadian researchers warn it's dangerous to rush such an experimental procedure.

"This couple should be applauded for their courage and their fight to bring this to Canada," said Dr. Mick Bhatia, director and senior scientist of the McMaster University Stem Cell and Cancer Research Institute in Ontario. "But there is much about stem cells we don't yet know. Rushing it could not only be dangerous, but it could curtail the efforts of thousands of scientists."

J.C. believes in the treatment, which has reduced the symptoms of his disease.

His weak tongue and throat muscles are stronger.

He doesn't choke or slur as much since he's had the treatment.

In the months follows the stem-cell injections, he has been able to walk without a cane, navigate without steadying himself against a wall and run with his children without falling.

"This treatment gives me my husband back," Cherie Haas said. "The effects last about eight months before he needs more stem cells, but it's completely worth it to see him so happy, active and healthy."

Bhatia said he has a lot of respect for someone who refuses to let a disease slow him down.

The doctor understands why the family wants to see the treatment The doctor understands why the family wants to see the treatment available closer to home.

But he said the science is complex, and making it available without enough testing could have dire consequences.

"We know that muscle stem cells make muscles, blood stem cells make blood and other stem cells can make all kinds of tissues," Bhatia said. "But what we don't know is what specific cues control that process. We don't want a stem cell to produce the incorrect tissue in the incorrect place. You wouldn't want a bone forming in the middle of a lung, for example."

Stem cells are rare and limited in the adult body. Their main function is to multiply to replenish cells that die or are damaged.

One of the best-known sources for scientists to harvest stem cells is from

unused embryos left after someone tries in vitro fertilization. But Bhatia said that process leads to the controversial side of stem-cell treatment.

Scientists haven't figured out how to stop those cells from multiplying, which can cause tumours.

"That's why we have to establish criteria and do careful testing to make sure that doesn't happen," Bhatia said.

"I don't know how anyone would have any level of confidence yet that what they are transplanting would be safe. All I can say is I would certainly not recommend it for my family or myself."

J.C. has had 10 stem-cell treatments through a combination of intravenous therapy and spinal injections. He's had no adverse effects and said if he can afford to go again, he will.

The Beike Biotechnology Co. has offered the treatment since opening in July 2005 after years of research in university laboratories across China.

Company chairman Dr. Sean Hu said Beike has more than 60 researchers focusing on stem-cell technology.

They use stem cells to treat Alzheimer's, cerebral palsy, spinal-cord injuries and autism.

"There are a lot of patients in countries around the world who could have a better quality of life, and even extend their lives, with this technology available, but many don't have that chance because of politics, religion or bureaucracy," the Beike website states.

"Beike's goal is to help those people. We take the most advanced biotechnological research in the world, specifically stem-cell therapy, and apply it clinically at a rapid pace."

Cherie knows the treatment may never be available in Canada in time for J.C. to benefit, but the people she met in China are inspiring her fight for stem-cell treatment in Canada.

She wants others to know the treatment exists and Canadian politicians should fund more research in the area. Most of all, she wants more Canadians to be able to access the stem cell treatment.

"I've met people from all over the world who have benefited from this," Cherie said. "I've seen babies smile for the first time after a treatment and I met a man with ALS who, for the first time in two years, felt strength in his hands again. It's not fair this isn't available in Canada."

Bone-marrow transplants for treating leukemia and auto-immune diseases are a form of stem-cell treatment, Bhatia said.

And a new way of using stem cells in the pancreas is being used successfully in Edmonton for treating diabetes.

"There's no question there is tremendous potential for what we can do with stem cells, so their heart is in the right place for wanting to see it in Canada," Bhatia said.

"We're working hard in that direction and I expect we'll see more and more types of stem-cell treatments available in Canada as time goes on, but we do have to remember there's a reason it takes time."

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