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Aussie doctor reveals battle with brain cancer and his fight for survival

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A top news presenter has been brought to tears by an Australian doctor diagnosed with incurable brain cancer who has decided to undergo a bold new therapy.

After being diagnosed with an incurable form of brain cancer in June, world-renowned melanoma expert Dr Richard Scolyer said despite the devastating news he became motivated to help forge a new era of treatment against the chronic disease.

Current treatment options for the life-threatening disease are limited, with most patients offered surgery followed by an intense course of radiation and chemotherapy.

Dr Scolyer said rather than undergo a daily treatment of chemo where he had “6 to 9 months to live at best”, he viewed his devastating diagnosis as a unique opportunity to progress research and treatment.

After spending hours on research and speaking to experts across the globe, Dr Scolyer decided alongside close friend and scientific colleague Professor Georgina Long that immunotherapy was the only available option.

“It was a bleak outlook – standard treatment has remained unchanged for nearly two decades, and for my cancer, survival rates are zero,” the co-director of Melanoma Institute Australia told the National Press Club on Wednesday.

“There were no clinical trials that I was eligible for. Accepting that status quo was never going to be an option.”

Opening up about the experience, the renowned doctor brought A Current Affair host Ally Langdon to tears at three points of the show.

“I know we have to tread cautiously, it’s very early stages, but it just makes me want to cry,” the host told Dr Scolyer.

“It’s so inspiring because you set out to blow up everything we know about treating brain cancer and you are doing it.”

Ms Langdon’s voice broke as she continued, saying that he had “changed the world” even if his treatment was not successful.

The host was also visibly teary-eyed in the outro of the video, describing Dr Scolyer as “someone special”.

Dr Scolyer said there was “absolutely” no regrets about starting the experimental treatment, saying he was “facing certain death”.

“We’ve transformed melanoma, I want to give it a crack and see if we can make a difference in brain cancer,” he said.

About 2,000 Australians develop brain cancer every year, according to official health data, with over half of cases being an aggressive and terminal form known as glioblastoma.

“Maybe I’m too much of an optimist, but my deep scientific understanding has allowed me to view my own diagnosis through a different lens,” he said

“So here we are today, 4 months after my diagnosis.”

A fellow pioneer of world-first melanoma treatments, Professor Long said she was “astounded” by the barren options faced by people diagnosed with chronic brain tumours.

“It seemed so unjust for Richard, whose expertise has been critical in some of the most innovative clinical trials in melanoma, to not have access to a clinical trial

himself,” Professor Long told the Press Club.

“There was pushback. There were no clinical trials, no protocols for using immunotherapy this way in this type of brain cancer.”

After consulting with medical experts across Australia, the pair oversaw the development of a vaccine designed to boost immune reaction against cancer cells.

Early scientific results so far have been “nothing short of phenomenal”, according to Professor Long.

“Firstly, there was a 10 fold increase in the immune cells within the tumour,” she said.

“Secondly, these immune cells were activated against an enemy. Thirdly, the immune cells within the tumour were bound to drugs - proving something we had already shown in melanoma, that there is no blood brain barrier [...] preventing drugs from reaching the tumour.”

Dr Scolyer said after surgery, followed by a combination of immunotherapy and the vaccine, he has returned to work and is enjoying cycling and running.

He said science has a long history of being pushed forward by scientists using themselves as subjects.

“Faced with certain death, there was no other decision to make. I have spent my life diagnosing and researching cancer, so why would I stop now,” he said.

Both Dr Scolyer and Professor Long will release their new findings at a scientific conference in the next few weeks.

Professor Scolyer’s personalised vaccine was developed using analysis of his specific tumour’s genome, which allowed scientists to identify what treatment would be most effective.

It won’t be used or sold to others.