Cancer Clinical Trials – Not actually all that scary

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Research, trials, cancer trials – words that may make nurses fearful of what is involved. Is it all too complicated for me to understand? Once it is broken down it isn't actually all that scary. Having recently taken up a new post as a cancer trials nurse, I have learned there is another whole world within cancer nursing. The purpose of a cancer trial is to assess new and effective ways to prevent, diagnose and treat cancer. They typically involve investigating new drugs, combinations of commonly used drugs or new ways of treating and diagnosing cancer. Overall, the aim is to detect cancer specifically in the initial stages, treat cancer, prevent recurrence and improve the quality of life for people with cancer.

The whole idea of a trial can initially cause unease. However, once patients and their families understand the safety measures and monitoring that are in place, as well as the experience of others they become more comfortable with the idea. In our role as cancer research nurses, one of the key jobs is to answer any questions the patients have in relation to the trial and ease any anxiety surrounding the treatment. Trials are highly regulated and patients are intensively monitored by their consultant and research team at all stages.

Cancer trials offer hope
While new and better treatments are being developed every year, we still do not know all the answers. Cancer trials enable patients to gain access to new and novel treatments which would not otherwise be available. They bring us closer to finding treatments that stop people dying from cancer. While the decision to partake in a trial is the ownership of the patient, the advice and guidance from their consultant and local research team is particularly important.

Cancer research nurses are typically involved with the patient from the point that they sign informed consent to take part in a clinical trial. Informed consent means the patient has had time to read all information provided without any influence from the team and agrees to treatment or intervention. To ensure ethical compliance, most clinical trial protocols are developed in line with the "Declaration of Helsinki". This is a set of ethical standards for research involving human beings, human material or identifiable data devised by the world medical association.

How it works

Our job involves understanding the principles of the treatment under investigation and how it will be given. We follow all aspects of the protocol with all patients. We are responsible for obtaining and sending any required samples for analysing locally and centrally to the laboratory. Often central laboratories are based around Europe with samples requiring shipping on ice. The organisation of our day is, understandably, key. We ensure the patient is screened appropriately and that they have met all inclusion criteria to be included in the trial. Once treatment has commenced we remain their link until the trial is closed, discontinued or the patient chooses to withdraw.

At times of course it can be stressful, but knowing a new treatment could potentially offer new options for patients is extremely rewarding. If you wish to read more about cancer trials and the work being done the following websites may be of interest:

European Medicines Agency

European Organisation for Research and Treatment of Cancer

European Organisation for Research and Treatment of Cancer

Cancer Research UK

Cancer Trials Ireland