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Study finds drug combo better controls advanced breast cancer

S'pore researchers try it on patients in stage four who had failed several prior therapies

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When Madam Lim Hay Eng experienced a relapse of her breast cancer in 2017, she was concerned about the side effects of any treatments for her condition.

She first had stage three breast cancer diagnosed in 2011, and underwent surgery to remove cancerous tissues and lymph nodes.

Madam Lim was placed on chemotherapy for about six months, which often left her unwell, and led to her being sent to the intensive care unit three times.

When the cancer came back, her doctor recommended that the 66-year-old retiree – then battling stage four breast cancer, which had spread to other parts of her

body – try a new oral therapy, which was more convenient and had more manageable side effects.

Female breast cancer is the most common cancer here, affecting more than 2,000 women each year, with more than 400 dying from the disease annually, according to the Singapore Cancer Registry.

Researchers from the National University Cancer Institute, Singapore (NCIS) at the National University Hospital and the Cancer Science Institute of Singapore (CSI Singapore) at the National University of Singapore found that combining two drugs – letrozole and lenvatinib – might help those with advanced-stage breast cancer better control the disease.

Letrozole is an anti-hormonal drug, while lenvatinib is already approved by the United States for use



in treating various other cancers. The researchers conducted a study of 43 patients with stage four breast cancer who had failed several prior therapies.

Half of those given the combined therapy saw their tumours shrink or experienced good control of the disease for more than six months.

"There was no pain at all," Madam Lim told reporters yesterday, noting that she could still perform household chores while on the medication.

The treatment – which was administered to her between January 2020 and February this year – resulted in a tumour in her liver

shrinking by about 30 per cent within a few months, and helped control its growth while she was on the trial.

The study's lead investigator, Professor Lee Soo Chin, told the media that an ongoing trial was comparing the combination against standard treatment.

The head of the Department of Haematology-Oncology at NCIS and senior principal investigator at CSI Singapore said she expected the treatment to be made affordable for patients, if it became a standard clinical option.

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Madam Lim Hay Eng's (seated) liver tumour shrank by about 30 per cent within a few months of the treatment. She is seen here with the study's lead investigator, Professor Lee Soo Chin (left), and NCIS Assistant Professor Joline Lim. ST PHOTO: JASON GUAH