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Cancer Researcher in South Africa Who Falsified Data Is Fired

By HENRI E. CAUVIN

JOHANNESBURG, March 10— The South African scientist who admitted falsifying data in a closely watched breast cancer study was dismissed today, six weeks after American researchers reviewing his work uncovered the fraud and alerted officials at his employer here, the University of the Witwatersrand.

The scientist, Werner Bezwoda, claimed in a study showcased last year at the annual meeting of the American College of Clinical Oncology to have found that high-dose chemotherapy, done in conjunction with bone-marrow transplantation, prolonged the lives of some women with advanced breast cancer.

It was the only study among five presented that supported the taxing treatment, and its remarkable findings were the talk of cancer researchers, who started looking at how to test the treatment on a far bigger sample of patients.

But in a news conference today after a disciplinary hearing for Dr. Bezwoda, Colin Bundy, the vice chancellor of Witwatersrand, said the university concluded that he had misrepresented the results of his study and misled colleagues, the public and, most importantly, his patients.

"For these women, there has been a rupture in the relationship of trust that should prevail in the medical profession," Mr. Bundy said. "We will do everything possible to prevent this shocking ethical breach of individual rights of our people from ever occurring again."

Mr. Bundy said the university had begun seeking any of Dr. Bezwoda's patients who were still alive and had asked the country's medical research council to conduct an audit of all of his work.

Researchers reviewing the breast cancer trials said their investigation uncovered numerous problems, starting with Dr. Bezwoda's misrepresentation of the drugs he used in the trials. By employing a less effective combination than is typically used in the conventional treatment, Dr. Bezwoda made the high-dose therapy appear more effective than it was, the investigation found.

In addition, researchers have been unable to find consent forms for any patients in the study, which was conducted from 1990 to 1995 at Hillbrow Hospital, which cared for mostly poor, mostly black patients during that period in the apartheid era.

Dr. Bezwoda made his case behind closed doors at the university today. But Witwatersrand officials said he admitted using chemotherapy drugs different from those he claimed to be using. The officials said he also defended the overall integrity of his study and his methods in it.

Speaking at his home late this afternoon, Dr. Bezwoda, who has been a leading cancer researcher in South Africa, repeated his admission and his defense. He said the combination of chemotherapy drugs he used was similar to those applied in conventional therapy and said he chose to substitute one for the other to make it more "accessible" to American researchers.

Dr. Bezwoda said that he had been railroaded by a university eager to save face and that he planned to appeal his case.

Outside researchers involved in the investigation applauded the prompt action of the university, which moved quickly to suspend Dr. Bezwoda after being alerted to the fraud in late January.

"This is in fact a lesson in how to deal with this kind of misconduct," Allen Herman, dean of South Africa's national school of public health, said at a news briefing on the Witwatersrand campus. "The university has acted with admirable speed and also with the appropriate response."