

Top researcher falsified breast cancer results

Chris McGreal in Johannesburg
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South Africa's leading chemotherapy specialist has admitted falsifying "ground breaking" research into a controversial cure for breast cancer that gave hope to women with advanced cases of the disease but divided the international medical community.

Witwatersrand university in Johannesburg is also investigating suspicions that Professor Werner Bezwoda experimented on dozens of black women for the research without their consent.

The university suspended Dr Bezwoda as head of haematology and clinical oncology after he admitted in writing to "a serious breach of scientific honesty and integrity" by lying about the conduct of experiments which claimed to show that high doses of chemotherapy followed by bone marrow transplants were more effective than existing treatments for breast cancer.

The study was hailed as a "ray of hope" for women with advanced breast cancer when it was presented to an international conference of 12,000 researchers in the US last May. It was approved by some of the doctor's peers but was contradicted by four other studies.

John Durant, vice-president of the US oncology society which hosted the conference, said the research was worthless. "I'm very angry at Bezwoda personally. He misled his patients, he misled us, he misled women who had hope," he said. "When it was learned that his research wasn't credible it put an end to any research in the same the area... He has done a lot of damage to clinical trials of all sorts."

US cancer researchers had already begun trials on the basis of Dr Bezwoda's claim that his treatment increased the survival rate and reduced relapses, when his research was exposed as a fraud after US experts visited Witwatersrand university last month.

Their suspicions were roused by missing data and the professor's refusal to provide paperwork for half of the 154 women he claimed were part of his study.

"You could conclude that they might not exist. You have to wonder whether a lot of this wasn't conducted in his head," said Dr Durant.

After the US team confronted Dr Bezwoda he admitted to "improving" his results by lying about the drugs given to women in his control group.

Dr Bezwoda, who declined to comment on the grounds that the university is still investigating, "apologised to the scientific community" in a letter to his colleagues.

"This was done out of a foolish desire to make the presentation more acceptable," he wrote. "This misrepresentation was not for financial gain. No person or agency provided any inducement. I

acknowledge my error and take sole responsibility."

The US investigating team may have uncovered other irregularities. Patients who participate in clinical trials are required to sign consent forms. None have been found for those women - all of them black - who are known to have been used in Dr Bezwoda's experiments.

Peter Cleaton-Jones, head of the university's medical ethics committee, said Dr Bezwoda had not even told them about his research. "Normally, when any research is done on humans, the first thing we check is that they have agreed to it. We have no record that these women agreed," he said.

Other researchers also fear that the women treated by Dr Bezwoda may have been denied proper care that could have extended their lives. The university is attempting to locate the women but the experiments were spread over five years from 1990, and it believes many of them have died.

Prof Cleaton-Jones is also investigating how Dr Bezwoda was able to keep his research hidden from the ethics committee. Even in Britain, he said, "it's easy to bypass the system if you're working as a single researcher and you're working on outside money, because it's based on trust."

The university said it did not know how Dr Bezwoda funded his research but believed he might have used the surplus from grants for other work.

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