

# The New York Times

February 5, 2000

## Breast Cancer Researcher Admits Falsifying Data

By DENISE GRADY

A South African researcher has admitted that he falsified data, and is retracting a widely publicized study claiming that bone-marrow transplantation and high-dose chemotherapy could prolong the lives of women with advanced breast cancer.

The admission of fraud came only after a team of American scientists visited the researcher's laboratory last week to examine his records, and found that they did not match what he had reported.

The researcher, Dr. Werner Bezwoda, of the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, presented his findings last May in Atlanta at a major conference of the American Society of Clinical Oncology. Of five studies discussed at that meeting, his was the only one indicating that the arduous treatment helped women. The others showed no benefit. Dr. Bezwoda's results were widely reported, and taken as a ray of hope. Some researchers were eager to try his methods in this country.

But Dr. Bezwoda's findings differed so markedly from those of other researchers that other scientists were immediately skeptical. Even before the meeting ended, some were calling for an independent group to travel to Johannesburg to examine his data before scientists here tried to replicate his experiments.

A group of American cancer experts did so last week. Dr. Bezwoda let them see only part of his data, and they quickly found problems. They reported their findings to the university, which began its own inquiry.

Dr. Peter Cleaton-Jones, chairman of University of Witwatersrand Committee for Research on Human Subjects, said in a telephone interview that Dr. Bezwoda's study had compared two groups of patients, an experimental group given the high-dose treatment and a control group that was supposed to have been given a more conventional treatment. Dr. Bezwoda reported that the high-dose group had fared much better than the controls.

"But what he labeled as the control group was not accurate," Dr. Cleaton-Jones said. The control patients were given a completely different treatment from what was stated in Dr. Bezwoda's reports. Dr. Cleaton-Jones said that as far as he knew, no patients were harmed. But, he said "the comparison he made was not valid." As a result, the study is worthless, researchers said.

Dr. John Durant, executive vice president of the oncology society, said, "It means you should just throw it out."

On Feb. 3, the University of Witwatersrand posted a news release on its Web site announcing the investigation of Dr. Bezwoda. It quoted a letter Dr. Bezwoda sent to colleagues on Jan. 30 admitting that he had "committed a serious breach of scientific honesty and integrity" and had misrepresented his results. Dr. Bezwoda has resigned from his university positions. A university spokeswoman, Martha Molete, said bluntly that Dr. Bezwoda had lied.

Asked how Dr. Bezwoda was allowed to present bogus work at the society's most important conference, Dr. Durant said the group had rigorous scientific standards, but essentially used an honor system, in which researchers submitted summaries of their work before the conference and assured the society that the research had been reviewed and approved by human research monitors at their own institutions.

"And we believe that's what everybody does, except this guy," Dr. Durant said. "He misled us, he misled the public, he misled the people who are being treated. I am very, very distressed, and very angry."

Dr. Durant was not part of the investigating group, but he said members told him they had discovered that Dr. Bezwoda circumvented the board at his university that was supposed to monitor human studies. "He was conducting this trial sort of on his own," Dr. Durant said.

The National Breast Cancer Coalition, a patient's advocacy group, said in a statement that the disclosures confirmed there was no data to support the use of high-dose treatment and bone marrow transplantation in breast cancer.

The treatment is one of the most contentious subjects in breast cancer, with some saying it is the only hope for women with advanced disease, and others saying women should not be subjected to its harsh side effects because it has not been proved to lengthen survival.

But Dr. Durant said the final verdict was not yet in, because the studies showing no benefit were still going on, and might eventually show that some patients were helped. Many doctors, though, say that if no benefit has shown up by now, any that does is likely to be extremely small.