



MEDIA RELEASE

Sunday, 31 May 2009

Study involving Australian women examines the impact of breast cancer treatment on memory and concentration.

An international clinical trial involving Australian women has shown that breast cancer patients taking the drug letrozole have better memory and thinking skills than those taking tamoxifen.

Results of the trial were presented today at the annual meeting of the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) in Orlando, Florida USA.

The BIG 1-98 Cognitive Function Sub-Study was conducted by the International Breast Cancer Study Group (IBCSG) and coordinated in Australia by the Australian New Zealand Breast Cancer Trials Group (ANZ BCTG). The study involved postmenopausal women with potentially curable hormone-sensitive breast cancer and compared memory and thinking ability for women taking tamoxifen or letrozole during the fifth year of their breast cancer treatment program.

Most postmenopausal women diagnosed with hormone-sensitive breast cancer take anti-oestrogen therapies such as tamoxifen or letrozole. Some women complain of problems with memory and thinking during and after their breast cancer treatment. This has been largely attributed to chemotherapy, and women themselves have coined the term "chemobrain". Oestrogen is known to be important for memory and thinking, however, the possible impact of anti-oestrogen therapies has been under-researched.

The results of the BIG 1-98 Sub-Study have shown that patients taking letrozole during the fifth year of treatment have better cognitive function than those taking tamoxifen.

Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre medical oncologist, Associate Professor Kelly-Anne Phillips, is the Cancer Council Victoria Colebatch Clinical Research Fellow and was an ANZ BCTG lead investigator on the sub-study. She said, "The study findings were not anticipated but are clearly informative, highlighting the importance of doing this type of clinical research. The results will help women and their doctors weigh up the pros and cons of each type of anti-oestrogen treatment."

The BIG 1-98 Cognitive Function Sub-Study involved 120 women internationally, with 43 women (35%) from Australia and New Zealand through the ANZ BCTG.

Post-menopausal women with hormone receptor positive, early-stage breast cancer were randomised to receive one of the following five year treatment plans in the BIG 1-98 trial:

- five years of tamoxifen alone;
- five years of letrozole alone;
- the sequence of tamoxifen for two years followed by letrozole for three years;
- the sequence of letrozole for two years followed by tamoxifen for three years.

During the fifth year of treatment, objective cognitive function (speed of psychomotor function, visual attention, working and verbal memory, learning) was evaluated by a computerised system that presents the tests as a series of card games and also a 12 word shopping list that women needed to recall after 20 minutes.

The findings of the trial show that women who were taking letrozole during the fifth year of their treatment had better overall cognitive function than those taking tamoxifen, and outperformed patients on tamoxifen for all cognitive tasks.

Further results are expected in one year to determine whether this difference persists after women stop taking the medications at the completion of their five years of anti-oestrogen treatment.

Professor John Forbes, Director of Research of the ANZ BCTG and a Member of the BIG 1-98 International Steering Committee said, "The ANZ BCTG has a long history of successful, quality-of-life research. This new and innovative research will help researchers and women to plan treatments together that optimise efficacy and quality of life."

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For further information on this media release and to arrange interviews with ANZ BCTG researchers, please contact:

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NOTES TO EDITORS

About the Australian New Zealand Breast Cancer Trials Group

The Australian New Zealand Breast Cancer Trials Group (ANZ BCTG) is Australia's national breast cancer research group. It is dedicated entirely to breast cancer research through the conduct of multi-institution clinical trials. Working in collaboration with 300 researchers in more than 80 of the leading medical institutions in Australia and New Zealand, and with similar research groups in 15 countries internationally ensures Australia and New Zealand are at the forefront of breast cancer research progress and this delivers benefits to women immediately. Additional information can be found at www.anzbctg.org.

About the International Breast Cancer Study Group

The International Breast Cancer Study Group (IBCSG), created as the 'Ludwig Breast Cancer Study Group' in 1977, is dedicated to innovative clinical research designed to improve the outcome of women with breast cancer. Additional information regarding BIG 1-98 or the IBCSG can be found at www.ibcsg.org.