Sandra Sharman – Submission on Regulation of autologous stem cell therapies

As a patient who has sought advice at the Melbourne Stem Cell Centre on the management of my arthritis, I welcome the opportunity to provide input to the TGA's Consultation regarding the regulation of autologous stem cells.

Historical overview

I am 72 year old (recently) retired Registered Nurse. I trained at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, Sydney and worked in the orthopaedic theatre. During my nursing career I have seen the development of orthopaedic care in hospital and (predominantly) community settings.

I sustained an injury to my knee in a car accident in 1959, fortunately this injury only caused problems for me in recent years. In 2014 I was advised by an orthopaedic surgeon that I required a knee replacement. During my nursing career I have observed and treated many patients after joint replacements and due to the continued pain, lack of mobility and failure of the procedures I was extremely reluctant to undergo a knee replacement. I have been interested in stem cell therapy for over 20 years and have followed progress of the therapy used to successfully treat dogs. I asked the orthopaedic surgeon if he was aware of any stem cell therapy that may be suitable for my condition. He referred me to the Melbourne Stem Cell Centre (MSCC).

Autologous Stem Cell Therapy at Melbourne Stem Cell Centre

I underwent autologous stem cell therapy in October 2014 at MSCC and found the staff to be extremely professional and felt the treatment was appropriate, safe, met all appropriate medical guidelines and practice and has been extremely successful in my case.

Prior to the MSCC therapy there was bone on bone contact within my knee and there was a persistent sac of fluid at the side of my knee. I experienced high levels of constant pain (especially during the night), my knee was continually hot and swollen, and my mobility was severely impaired, especially walking on hard surfaces and up and down stairs.

Within a week of my treatment I noticed a significant improvement, firstly an absence of pain, the swelling was alleviated and my mobility started to improve. Four months on from my treatment my mobility is the best it has been for decades (I can even chase sheep on my farm without pain), MRI scans show there is no longer bone on bone contact and the fluid sac has dissipated.

My experience with autologous stem cell therapy shows it is appropriate, safe and offers a better alternative to joint replacement (joint replacement therapy often fails – I believe there are statistics available to confirm this).

Government support for stem cell therapy

I strongly believe Government needs to ensure that stem cell research can continue to help people like me and the many others living with conditions that this therapy could help, either now or in the future.

The research I am participating in has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committees of Monash and La Trobe Universities and this reassures me that they are being carried out in accordance with appropriate medical guidelines and practice.

I was treated as a private patient as my condition was far worse than acceptable for the trial guidelines. I believe research and trials should be expanded and continued as they offer a chance for significant improvement in quality of life, particularly in relation to pain and mobility.

I would very much like to see this therapy available to both public and private patients (claimable on private health insurance). I paid for the treatment myself.

I believe stem cell therapy could be a far more cost effective treatment than current joint replacement surgery and encourage the Government to explore the cost benefits of stem cell therapy compared to surgical alternatives.

It would be advantageous for the Government to conduct an awareness campaign ensuring that medical practitioners, health professionals and the public are properly informed of the benefits of stem cell therapy.

It is critical that any changes the Government considers as part of this Consultation do not limit that work or the options available to patients, many of whom live with crippling side-effects of their conditions

As a patient, I trust that these considerations will be reflected by the Consultation and its outcomes in a way that does not deny patients access to treatments that may have significant benefit