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## Seeds of hope for cancer victims Cancer drug too late for researcher's sister

EXCLUSIVE

JAMIE WALKER  
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

VICTORIA Gordon holds in her hands the chance at life that she had to deny her cancer-stricken sister: a potential breakthrough drug that "eats" tumours.

Dr Gordon and her husband, fellow scientist Paul Reddell, discovered the compound in a north Queensland rainforest and have spent nearly a decade developing the drug and demonstrating its effectiveness in animals.

Hundreds of horses, dogs, cats, even a Tasmanian devil had life-threatening tumours reduced to harmless sludge by the experimental drug, EBC-46,



LYNDON MECHEISEN  
**Fruit of the Blushwood tree**

produced from the seed of the common blushwood tree.

Now, at last, it is to be tested on people battling advanced melanoma and notoriously difficult to treat head and neck cancers. Clinical trials are set to get under way in a number of hospitals by September.

Dr Gordon and Dr Reddell

realised something special was happening when they saw hungry rat kangaroos spit out fallen berries from the blushwood tree, which grows only in the tropical rainforests of the Atherton Tablelands, west of Cairns.

The chemical responsible for this "feeding deterrent" turned out to be EBC-46, propelling Dr Gordon to her moment of truth with her dying sister, Cheryl.

The 61-year-old chef begged Dr Gordon to toss away the rule book and let her have the experimental drug before she succumbed last December to liver cancer. "I couldn't," a tearful Dr Gordon says, for the first time telling her story of scientific discovery and its anguished denouement with her older sister.

"Basically, the question Cheryl asked was, 'Do you believe EBC-46 could help me, and

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can I have the drug?' Factually, I said to her we were unsure of the role EBC-46 would play in liver cancer and, even so, this is a drug that has not yet been approved for human use. And, as such, no, she could not use the drug. I just had to be ... cold and clinical with that. It was heartbreaking."

Dr Gordon and Dr Reddell have been reluctant to speak in detail about EBC-46 until now, with the clinical phase I/II human trial in sight. If all goes to plan, the program will begin within months with about 30 cancer patients, all of them "at the end of the line" with conventional treatments.

Turning down her sister was the hardest thing Dr Gordon has had to do. "We are asked almost on a daily basis for access to this drug," she says. "I am sincere when I say this ... as much as I would dearly love to help those in need, it's simply not an option. The regulators and the rules are there to protect patients. Yes, we have very good results in the animals. But if we have not proven this drug is a safe drug to use in people, there is no way we should be making it available."

Atherton vet Justine Campbell, one of the first to treat pets with the drug, said she was approached by a client who had terminal melanoma. "He was desperate," she said. "He had heard about EBC-46 and asked, 'Can you treat me?' And I had to say to him, to his face, 'I'm sorry, I can't. It's just awful.'"

Years of research into the drug's effectiveness in animals have been submitted for publication in an international scientific journal by Dr Gordon, Dr Reddell and scientists from Brisbane's QIMR Berghofer Medical Research Institute.

The head of the institute's Cancer Drug Mechanism Group, Glen Boyle, said the drug broke down tumours within hours of being injected into them. Human melanoma grown

IN AUSTRALIAN MAGAZINE

### The trees of life



on the skin of laboratory mice began to swell by the time the animals were returned to their cage, a sign the powerful response triggered by the drug was choking off the tumour's blood supply. Minutes later, the growth was a bruised purple, a sign the cancer cells were dying.

"A couple of days after that there is a scab where the tumour used to be," said Dr Boyle, the lead author of research paper.

Veteran medical scientist Peter Parsons said fieldwork with cancer-struck animals outside the laboratory increased his confidence that the drug would work on most tumour types — and in people.

QBiotech, the company established by Dr Gordon and Dr Reddell, both 54, says the drug destroyed all traces of tumour or shrank them by more than half in 78 per cent of the 344 companion animals treated by vets, including Ms Campbell.

Dr Gordon insists "it's time, we need to get this into people".

For her, the clock is ticking in a personal sense. In addition to losing her sister to cancer, both her parents and grandparents died of a disease that will kill more than 44,000 Australians this year. "I have already lost loved ones. I'm sure that more of my family will present with cancer, as my sister did. I wasn't ready for her. So I have some incentive, real incentive, to get this drug through."