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How cancer patient found life-saving treatment

By Jim Stafford For The Oklahoman

In November 2011, Rex Tullis, Ph.D., a former professor and chair of the School of Education at Southern Nazarene University, was diagnosed with melanoma, an aggressive form of skin cancer.

By the time it was diagnosed, the cancer had spread, or metastasized, to his lungs and glands in his neck.

"I had surgery, and my options weren't real good at that point, because melanoma was a really difficult disease, historically," Tullis said. "So, I began to look around for some options that would give me a better prognosis, or better outlook."

Serendipity stepped in to connect Tullis with Wei Chen, Ph.D., a professor of biomedical engineering and dean of the College of Science and Mathematics at the University of Central Oklahoma.

Chen had developed a radical new treatment for metastatic cancers that combines local laser irradiation with an immunological stimulant. It's called laser immunotherapy.

Since 2000, Chen's research into laser immunotherapy has been supported by grants from the Oklahoma Center for the Advancement of Science and Technology (OCAST), along with a \$1.3 million ROI grant awarded in 2017 by the National Institutes of Health. It was the first such NIH grant awarded to a non-research institution in Oklahoma.

With time running out for Tullis, he first learned of Chen and his new treatment over Labor Day weekend of 2012 at a family picnic near Binger.

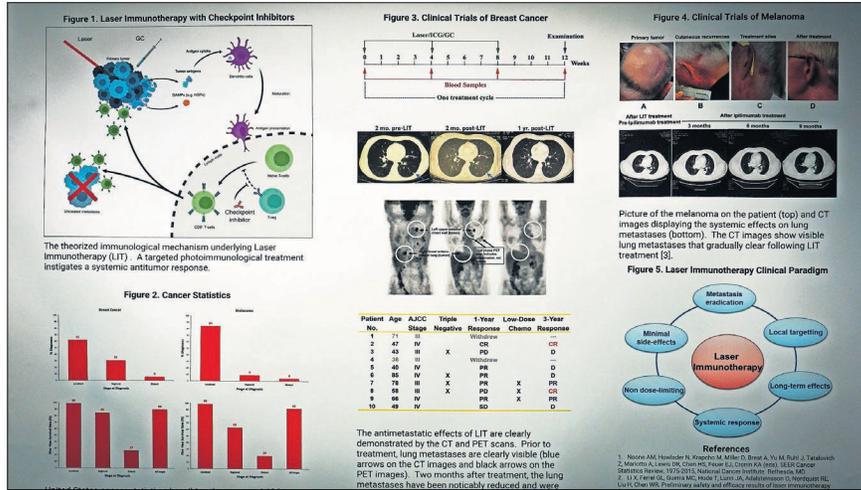
Turns out that Tullis's daughter had a friend, Dawn Updike, who had worked for Chen as a lab assistant.

"My daughter said, 'You need to talk to Dawn,'" Tullis said.

Tullis immediately reached out to Updike, who sent him a paper that had been published on Chen's research.

Another coincidence — Tullis's brother, K.J., was an academic colleague of Chen's at UCO.

"I emailed Wei Chen on Saturday night," Tullis said. "He



Results are shown from some of Wei Chen's research. [PROVIDED PHOTOS]



called me Sunday afternoon. By Wednesday, I was under treatment in San Antonio. That was almost nine years ago. There have been some things that have happened along the way, but for the last almost six years I've been in remission with no detectable melanoma."

As Tullis told his story to me and OCAST colleague, Debbie Cox, in Chen's research laboratory on UCO campus, we had questions. For instance, how was Tullis able to undergo a life-saving treatment from a technology that has yet to go through the long-FDA approval process? The answer is that the medical team in Texas combined Dr. Chen's laser treatment with a topical immunotherapy for melanoma that was already FDA approved.

Chen collaborates with a St. Louis-based company called



Wei Chen's lab is shown in the University of Central Oklahoma's new Donald Betz STEM Research and Learning Center.

Immunophotonics, which is working to commercialize his laser immunotherapy. Clinical trials for new immunotherapies are under way in Peru and the Bahamas.

Success with patients undergoing the clinical trials and that of Tullis here in Oklahoma has caused Chen to view his research in a new way.

"It really transformed me," Chen said. "Because my research

is no longer simply an academic practice and not just how many papers I can publish or how much funding I can receive or how many patents I am awarded. Even though I need all of them — the more, the better — however, the motivation, the drive is different."

For example, a patient who underwent successful laser immunotherapy treatment in Peru sent Chen a card that said,

"Thank you for giving me a chance to live."

"That is very powerful, and I realize my work actually has great impact," Chen said. "That motivates and energizes me every day to work harder and push our laser immunotherapy to a new level to reduce the pain and suffering of people."

In the wake of his own laser immunotherapy treatment and subsequent cancer remission, Tullis has become a de facto spokesman for the Chen team. He has even appeared at conferences with him.

Tullis said he is grateful for the scientific advancement that made a difference for him, but sees a larger force than coincidence that brought it all together.

"It's just a providential story, how I reached Wei Chen and how we progressed from there," Tullis said. "It's hard not to be a believer when I'm sitting here."

Jim Stafford writes about Oklahoma innovation and research and development topics on behalf of the Oklahoma Center for the Advancement of Science & Technology (OCAST).