

Immediate Release
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News Release

New Equipment Donation Enables Critically Important First-in-World Saskatchewan-led Clinical Trial

Saskatoon, SK- Saskatchewan has launched a first-ever clinical trial, focused on substantially improving the quality of life for ovarian cancer patients.

The trial has been made possible with a Next Generation Sequencer, a new piece of equipment purchased in honor of Donald E Kramer, founder of Kramer Tractor, through a very significant generational donation by his children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren.

This Next Generation Sequencer is the first in Saskatchewan for direct patient care, and it is the first Sequencer in Canada to perform tumor testing for clinical decision-making in gynecologic cancers.

“This is an incredibly generous donation from a family that continues to give in support of Saskatchewan people. I want to say a very heartfelt thank-you to all the Kramer family for their kindness and compassion. By providing the funds necessary for us to purchase this innovative piece of equipment you will have an important impact on the lives of Saskatchewan cancer patients for years to come,” said Nora Yeates, CEO, Cancer Foundation of Saskatchewan.

The Next Generation Sequencer offers industry-leading technology in the treatment of cancer in the province. It will allow oncologists to predict patient responses to several new cancer drug treatments.

The results of this ovarian cancer trial will lead to better informed treatment choices, fewer treatment-related side effects, and enhanced quality of life for patients with ovarian cancer.

No other program anywhere in Canada has implemented this precision medicine/personalized medicine approach for ovarian cancer.

This pragmatic, real-world evidence trial, is under the leadership of Dr. Laura Hopkins, Professor of Oncology at the University of Saskatchewan, and Provincial Lead for Gynecologic Oncology with the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency. The trial is underway at the Saskatoon Cancer Center and the Alan Blair Cancer Center. The Sequencer is located at the Advanced Diagnostic Research Laboratory at the University of Saskatchewan. Dr. John DeCoteau, Professor of Pathology, and Medical Director of the Advanced Diagnostic Research Laboratory will be reporting out the tumor test results.

“The work we are doing will allow us to give ovarian cancer patients precision estimates about their chances of responding to treatment with customized patient information resources to facilitate a personalized and informed decision about whether a treatment is right for them,” said Hopkins.

In the trial, tumors of ovarian cancer patients are tested for a range of genetic changes that predict response to a new class of drugs, called PARP inhibitors. These drugs are expensive and can be associated with some very serious and even life-threatening side effects. The chance of these drugs being effective is dependent on genetic changes in the tumor with some patients responding very well and others showing minimal, if any, response.

Tumor testing is not currently a funded and universally available service in Canada - one of the goals of this trial is to provide evidence to decision-makers that tumor testing is needed.

“This testing allows us to quantify the amount of benefit for the patient, which then allows the patient to decide whether the benefit is worth the risks,” said Hopkins. “Some patients will choose to take the drug and others will not. This is the essence of personalized medicine, and the results of this trial will change treatment paradigms in cancer care,” she said.

According to Hopkins, the Next Generation Sequencer will play a critical role in the establishment of a Precision Oncology program at the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency, and this will benefit all patients with cancer.

Shelley Meier was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in July 2023. After being made aware of the trial by Dr. Hopkins earlier this fall, she chose to participate in it because of her concern about potentially taking toxic therapy that she may not benefit from.

“The treatments currently available are known to be toxic and the side effects can be severe. I desire a quality of life during remission that these treatments do not ensure. Put simply, is the time I gain worth the pain of the side effects,” she said.

Meier said that, in addition, she would hope that by participating in this trial she contributes to learnings that will benefit other women through their journey with ovarian cancer.

Hopkins said as the first of its kind, this clinical trial is poised to lead a national and potentially global shift in ovarian cancer care. She is extremely grateful to the Kramer family for their very generous donation, and for the support of the Cancer Foundation of Saskatchewan and the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency. She said having access to a Next Generation Sequencer in Saskatchewan will be life changing for oncologists and patients.

“Being able to access specific information about the tumour will empower patients to make informed choices about their treatment as well as their quality of life,” she said.

The Saskatoon Sequencer will also provide tumor testing for patients with metastatic prostate cancer. For these patients, tumor testing can identify similar genetic changes that predict for response to PARPi drugs.

“This and other technologies now available mean that oncologists no longer must make an educated guess as to how much or even whether a patient will respond to a given therapy,” she said.

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Background

Ovarian cancer is the most fatal gynecologic cancer—only 40 per cent of patients survive more than five years after diagnosis.

Every year in Saskatchewan nearly 75 women are diagnosed with ovarian cancer and 60 women pass away as a result of the disease.