

The World Today with Eleanor Hall

An hour of current affairs background and debate from Australia and the world every Monday to Friday, 12:10 pm, ABC [Local Radio](#) and [Radio National](#).

New hope for mesothelioma treatment

Lindy Kerin reported this story on [Monday, November 22, 2010 12:38:00](#)

ELEANOR HALL: Researchers in Sydney say they've made a discovery that could lead to better treatment for people with the deadly asbestos-related disease mesothelioma. The researchers at the Asbestos Diseases Research Institute say they've found a "tumour marker" which could allow doctors to offer more appropriate treatment options.

Lindy Kerin has our report.

LINDY KERIN: Australia has one of the highest rates of malignant mesothelioma in the world. Every year more than 700 people will be given the news they have the disease and many will be told they have just months to live.

NICO VAN ZANDWIJK: The current situation is still that median survival of patients with malignant mesothelioma is around one year.

LINDY KERIN: Professor Nico Van Zandwijk is the director of the Asbestos Diseases Research Institute in Sydney. He says there are a range of treatment options available and over the past decade there have been improvements in chemotherapy.

NICO VAN ZANDWIJK: There is now a form of chemotherapy that is administered to patients with mesothelioma, if they are in a reasonable condition. Radiotherapy can be given in a palliative manner so to curtail complaints but can also be used in a small fraction of the patient to treat an area which has been previously treated by surgery.

LINDY KERIN: Mesothelioma grows and spreads rapidly often before symptoms appear. This makes an early diagnosis and effective treatment extremely difficult but now doctors will be able to better tailor treatment for patients, after Professor Van Zandwijk and his team uncovered a new prognostic factor.

They've found that certain markers in blood or tumour tissues can show how aggressive the disease is and will help doctors to decide what approach to take.

NICO VAN ZANDWIJK: The factor we found is a factor in the blood, was the lymphocyte to neutrophil ratio and that indicates, when it is at a certain level, that is directly related to prognosis and we are currently making that certain in a prospective, so in a group of patients that is currently receiving treatment.

And so if you're thinking for instance of therapy chemotherapy, surgery and radiotherapy, then there is a small group of patients who will profit from quite intensive treatment from chemotherapy and sometimes after that chemotherapy surgery and radiotherapy. Now this type of factor helps us to select the patient for that type of treatment.

LINDY KERIN: The Asbestos Diseases Research Institute is the world's first stand-alone research facility looking at asbestos-related diseases. It was officially opened by the former prime minister Kevin Rudd in January last year.

Barry Robson from the Asbestos Diseases Foundation has congratulated the Institute on its work so far.

BARRY ROBSON: For them to get onto this within 18 months, it just shows you what can be done. It's vitally important because on average, diagnosis to death is 155 days, so this breakthrough with this marker is a major, major step forward.

LINDY KERIN: The Asbestos Diseases Research Institute's findings have been released to coincide with National Asbestos Week.

ELEANOR HALL: Lindy Kerin reporting.

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