



Don't take 'miracle' drug for granted, caution doctors

By MICHELLE ROBINSON

IT'S HAILED as a miracle drug but patients need to be careful they don't take a popular leukaemia treatment for granted.

Many newly diagnosed adult patients with chronic myeloid leukaemia have been outliving their life expectancies by taking the Medsafe-approved drug Glivec.

"It's an amazing medical story that's exceeded expectations," Auckland haematologist Dr Peter Browett said. "No one would have anticipated it to have changed the nature of the disease so significantly."

But 11 years after Glivec's clinical trial, medical professionals were questioning the drug's long-term effects. Studies in France and Australia were ongoing to find

whether patients must stay on the drug for life for it to be effective.

Rotorua insurance consultant Carol Clarke, 64, credits the drug with extending her life.

She was among the first to take part in the clinical trial in 2000 after being diagnosed with chronic myeloid leukaemia.

At the time she was told she had only four years to live. "It's most definitely prolonged my life. I'm very lucky to be here. I was unwell for probably about four months before I was diagnosed and I was getting more and more tired and feeling really lethargic."

While apprehensive about the trial at the time, she said she didn't want the other option available to her at the time of taking Interferon

which often gave patients flu-like side-effects.

The side-effects from Glivec, fluid around the eyes and slight nausea, were not so noticeable, she said. "I'm used to feeling nausea, I've learned to live with it by eating bland food, I don't have spicy food." She continues to work fulltime and has celebrated the birth of six grandchildren.

"Nowadays it's just like I'm taking a pill, it's not like I wake up every morning and think I've got cancer.

"When I was diagnosed I didn't even think I would make 60 years of age and was upset I would never have grandchildren."

FACTS ABOUT LEUKAEMIA AND BLOOD CANCERS

- ▶ The Leukaemia and Blood Foundation's appeal week runs from November 7 to 13 and aims to raise awareness about leukaemia and blood cancers across New Zealand.
- ▶ Every day, six New Zealanders are diagnosed with a blood cancer or related condition. That's about 2200 people each year.
- ▶ Blood cancers combined (leukaemia, lymphoma and myeloma) are the third biggest cancer killer in New Zealand. It's estimated there are 10,000 New Zealanders living with leukaemia, lymphoma, myeloma or a related blood condition.
- ▶ Leukaemia is the most common childhood cancer, but about 90% of leukaemia cancers are diagnosed in adults.