Allegheny Health Network, Johns Hopkins, Collaborate on Molecular Testing for Late-Stage Cancer Patients

AHN-Hopkins collaboration will point the way for more effective treatments that are based on cancer's DNA

PITTSBURGH, PA (PRWEB) September 13, 2016 -- A collaboration between Allegheny Health Network (AHN) Cancer Institute and the Johns Hopkins Kimmel Cancer Center will provide molecular testing for all AHN patients with certain late-stage cancers. Molecular testing helps physicians identify certain mutations or genetic alterations in their cancers, making patients more likely to benefit from certain drugs that target those alterations.

Under the new agreement, Johns Hopkins Kimmel Cancer Center experts will provide molecular testing for all AHN patients with Stage 4 colorectal cancer, melanoma, non-squamous, non-small cell lung cancers, and advanced gastrointestinal stromal tumors.

“By using molecular panel testing, we can gain extraordinary insights into some of the genetic alterations present in each individual’s cancer,” said Gene Finley, MD, Deputy Director of Medical Oncology, AHN Cancer Institute. “Many tumors carry mutations that make them vulnerable to certain medications, and we can use the information provided by Johns Hopkins to help make the best treatment decisions for our patients.”

The treatment of cancers based on the results of molecular testing has grown widely over the past few years. The use of trastuzumab, which is manufactured under several names (including Herceptin) to slow the growth of breast cancers that express the HER-2 hormone, is one example of targeted therapy. Herceptin, like other targeted therapies, generally causes fewer unpleasant side effects than chemotherapy.

“Our agreement with Johns Hopkins gives us a framework to streamline the ordering of molecular tests, which will in turn expedite the availability of results” said Jan Silverman, MD, System Chair, Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine, AHN. “Quick results are particularly essential for our patients with advanced cancers.”

Molecular testing is particularly useful for non-small cell lung cancer patients, as scientists have identified several biomarkers associated with the cancer. About one-third of patients test positive for at least one of them, helping doctors determine how a patient will respond to a particular treatment, Dr. Finley said.

The agreement to provide molecular testing is the latest way in which AHN Cancer Institute’s collaboration with the Johns Hopkins Kimmel Cancer Center is benefiting patients throughout the Pittsburgh region and beyond. The collaboration has given AHN patients access to innovative clinical trials at Johns Hopkins, as well as second opinions, providing patients with comprehensive treatment options.

“As we move into a new era in the war on cancer, collaboration among institutions is an essential ingredient to success,” said David Parda, MD, Chair, AHN Cancer Institute. “Our agreement with Johns Hopkins is a perfect example of two great institutions breaking down barriers to share expertise for the benefit of patients. We are working together in a collaborative way to optimize the best methods and approaches for molecular testing and implement best practices.”
AHN researchers, working with the National Surgical Adjuvant Breast and Bowel Project (NSABP), conducted the practice-changing clinical trial that made trastuzemab standard therapy for many breast cancer patients. Pioneering work in molecular testing at both AHN and NSABP also included development of the Oncotype DX assay, further improving a personalized treatment approach for breast cancer patients.

Blair Jobe, MD, and colleagues from the AHN Esophageal and Lung Institute also recently discovered a panel of biomarkers that could detect esophageal cancer at its earliest stages, and many other groups within the AHN Cancer Institute are providing genomic based personalized patient care and conducting advancing research in this important and exciting area within their cancer-specific disease site groups.

About the Allegheny Health Network:
Allegheny Health Network (AHN.ORG), part of Highmark Health, is an integrated healthcare delivery system serving the Western Pennsylvania region. The Network is comprised of eight hospitals, including its flagship academic medical center Allegheny General Hospital, Allegheny Valley Hospital, Canonsburg Hospital, Forbes Hospital, Jefferson Hospital, Saint Vincent Hospital, Westfield Memorial Hospital and West Penn Hospital; an employed physician organization, a research institute, health + wellness pavilions, home and community-based health services and a group purchasing organization. The Network employs approximately 17,500 people, and has more than 2,100 physicians on its medical staff. The Network also serves as a clinical campus for Temple University School of Medicine, Drexel University College of Medicine and the Lake Erie College of Osteopathic Medicine.

About Allegheny Health Network Cancer Institute: The Allegheny Health Network Cancer Institute is home to a comprehensive cancer prevention, diagnosis, treatment, education, and research program that provides the complete spectrum of oncology care. The Network is comprised of more than 50 oncology clinics across the western Pennsylvania region, including hospital-based programs at Allegheny General Hospital, Allegheny Valley Hospital, Forbes Hospital, Jefferson Hospital, West Penn Hospital and other collaborative hospital partners. The Network is home to more than 200 medical, surgical and radiation oncology physicians, one of the state’s largest bone marrow transplant and cellular therapy programs, and the nation’s largest radiation oncology network accredited by both the American Society for Radiation Oncology and American College of Radiology. Allegheny Health Network’s cancer research program offers patients access to more than 200 clinical trials and the Network’s physicians hold leadership roles at the National Cancer Institute, the NCI-funded National Surgical Adjuvant Breast and Bowel Project, (the world’s foremost breast and bowel cancer research group based at Allegheny General Hospital), and many national and international organizations that advance cancer care. The AHN Cancer Institute also has a formal collaboration with the Johns Hopkins Sidney Kimmel Comprehensive Cancer Center to share knowledge and expertise to advance patient care, education, and research for cancer patients and oncology professionals.
Contact Information
Stephanie Waite
Allegheny Health Network
http://www.wpahs.org
+1 412-330-4434

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