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HIV patients with cancer doing better

Bone marrow transplant and therapy gives positive results

By **AUDREY EDWARDS**
audee@thestar.com.my

KUALA LUMPUR: Two HIV patients who were also suffering from cancer for years underwent extensive treatment before receiving bone marrow transplants for their cancers.

Today, their cancers are in remission and more importantly, they do not show signs of detectable HIV in their blood cells after stopping their anti-retroviral therapy (ART) a few months ago.

This was the most "exciting" research revealed during the IAS 2013 conference yesterday.

"We need time to tell," said Boston's Brigham and Women's Hospital infectious diseases division associate physician Dr Timothy J. Henrich, who is one of the physician-researchers for the "Boston Patients".

He added that while the results were exciting, it was not an indication of a cure.

"Long-term follow-up of at least one year would be required to understand the full impact of a bone marrow transplant on HIV persistence," he added.

Both HIV male patients had Hodgkin's lymphoma and were on long-term ART.

It had been previously announced that the virus which

was easily detected in the blood lymphocytes of both men prior to their transplants became undetectable within eight months after the procedures.

Dr Henrich, who is also instructor in medicine at the Harvard Medical School, said what happened to the patients was that the "donor" cells took over the "host" cells, likening it to the Pacman video game effect.

Asked whether it would be possible for non-cancer HIV patients to undergo a similar procedure, Dr Henrich said that for now, such transplants was only carried out for those with diseases such as cancer, adding that it was also expensive with a cost of US\$100,000 (RM380,000) for the procedure.

"We have demonstrated at least 1,000 to 10,000 fold reduction in the size of the HIV reservoir in the peripheral blood of these two patients," he said.

But researchers observed a marked decrease in HIV-1 DNA from peripheral blood after transplantation which followed a similar trajectory to the other two.

Both patients are also different from the "Mississippi Baby" who was deemed "functionally cured" after ART treatment had been stopped after being started soon after birth.