



A brighter future

CLINICAL TRIALS OFFER HOPE TO CANCER PATIENTS

In the last issue of *Blues Healthline* (Issue 4, 2007, page 6), BCBSNM members learned about the top-quality cancer treatment available in New Mexico. Yet sometimes—despite tremendous cancer treatment advancements in recent decades—a patient's cancer may not respond to current treatment protocols. In such a case, the patient may elect to try a promising, next-generation treatment strategy available through clinical trial research.*

What is a clinical trial? Clinical trials are studies that evaluate the safety and effectiveness of new drugs or treatment strategies. Currently,

there are hundreds of ongoing clinical trials in the United States.

The University of New Mexico (UNM) Cancer Center plays a pivotal role in several of these studies. Some of this research has produced new treatment strategies that have radically altered and improved how physicians treat cancer patients.

Helping to fight breast cancer

Melanie E. Royce, MD, associate professor of medicine and director of the Multidisciplinary Breast Program at the UNM Cancer Center, and her colleagues play a significant role in one of these landmark studies. The National Cancer Institute-supported NSABP-B31

clinical trial is a collaborative effort conducted by several institutions nationwide. The purpose of the trial is to test the use of trastuzumab (known by the brand name Herceptin®) for treating early-stage HER2-positive breast cancers.

The HER2 receptor is a naturally occurring protein involved in human cellular growth and proliferation. Patients who have an overabundance of HER2 receptors are classified as having HER2-positive cancer, which tends to be more aggressive than other forms of the disease.

Herceptin binds to the HER2 receptor to reduce or prevent the cancer from growing and spreading. The medication has been shown to improve survival rates when treating advanced HER2-positive breast cancer. However, it was not known whether it would work with earlier stages of HER2-positive cancers.

Making strides The trial, along with a very similar trial (NCCTG N9831) involving more than 3,000 women, revealed that using Herceptin as an additional postsurgical therapy reduced the recurrence of the disease at three years by more than 50 percent.

"From a research perspective, this is phenomenal!" Dr. Royce says. "It is very rare for any kind of research study to produce such dramatic results at such an early time."

Researchers continue to follow up with study participants to learn more about longer-term outcomes.

If you or someone you know would like to learn more about the UNM Cancer Center's clinical trials, go to cancer.unm.edu and click on the *Clinical Trials* tab. To learn more about clinical trials that are currently under way, select *Our Clinical Trials Database*.

*Before participating in clinical trials, patients need to verify which medications and services will be funded through the study and which services are covered through their insurance plans. Some health care plans may limit this type of coverage as a benefit. BCBSNM members can call the Customer Service number on the back of their ID cards to verify covered services.