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Cancer treatment changing - expert

DICK AHLSTROM Science Editor

CANCER TREATMENTS are changing, moving away from a one-size-fits-all chemotherapy approach to personalised treatments. These will prompt the patient's own immune system to attack and destroy a tumour.

Doctors will be able to profile a patient before any treatments to see which work best, said Prof Jim Johnston. And they will use antibodies that lock on to tumour cells to prompt the immune system to destroy them.

Prof Johnston was speaking ahead of a lecture he delivered last night at the RDS in Dublin entitled Cancer Treatment – Does the Immune System have all the Answers?

He described his own research into targeting tumour cells by helping the immune system to recognise and destroy them. Typically, the immune system ignores harmful cancer cells, viewing them as self rather than foreign.

Prof Johnston is this year's recipient of the Irish Society for Immunology's Public Lecture Award. The recipient is invited to give a talk to a general, non-scientific audience, providing an opportunity for people to hear about the very latest research in immunology.

Prof Johnston's lecture took place in the RDS Concert Hall and was well attended. He provided an intriguing look at how the immune system could be used to destroy tumours without causing the collateral damage typical of most cancer treatments.

"The main message is there is a huge amount of effort to harness the immune system to kill off tumours," he said before the lecture.

The deputy director of the Centre for Infection and Immunity at Queens University Belfast and founder of Fusion Antibodies Ltd, his research has produced a new treatment that is ready to go into Phase I trials.

It is for use against colorectal cancers and uses both chemotherapy and antibodies.

The chemotherapy injures the tumour cells and they release special substances in an attempt to recover. The antibodies attach on to these substances, blocking recovery and causing tumour cell death.

Part of this work includes an effort to find markers that can predict those patients who will respond well to the treatment or respond poorly.

The RDS and The Irish Times organise the annual public lecture award in association with the Irish Society for Immunology. Those who missed the event but who would like to see the lecture can go to the RDS web site www.rds.ie/webcasts where a webcast will be available shortly.