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Poison Drummer Rikki Rockett Cancer-Free Following Immunotherapy at UC San Diego Health

Rikki Rockett, drummer for the band Poison, got the best news of his life last week: his cancer is gone. Rockett was diagnosed with oral cancer more than a year ago. Several months ago, he came to Moores Cancer Center at UC San Diego Health, where he underwent experimental cancer immunotherapy, which has now eradicated the tumor.

Rockett says he joined the clinical trial not only out of concern about himself, but also about being around for his three-year-old daughter, Lucy, and his seven-year-old son, Jude.

Immunotherapy is a relatively new form of treatment that boosts the body's immune system, better enabling it to attack cancer cells. Under the care of Ezra Cohen, MD, professor of medicine at UC San Diego School of Medicine and associate director for Translational Science at Moores Cancer Center, Rockett participated in a clinical trial that is testing a combination of two immunotherapy drugs that remove defenses cancers use against the immune system. This type of treatment is only available at a few specific medical centers around the country.

“We are delighted that Rikki responded so well to immunotherapy. He had already been through a lot with chemotherapy and radiation treatment before he came to us, but his cancer recurred,” said Cohen, who also leads the Solid Tumor Therapeutics Program at Moores Cancer Center, a National Cancer Institute-Designated Comprehensive Cancer Center. “That’s the



Rockett in front of Moores Cancer Center at UC San Diego Health, the day of his latest scan, which revealed that his oral cancer is gone.

advantage of immunotherapy over traditional therapy — there are fewer side effects, we can specifically eradicate cancer cells almost anywhere in the body, and it’s effective against tumors that are resistant to chemotherapy and radiation.”

Rockett broke the good news last week via his Instagram account, where he posted a photo of himself with Cohen. The drummer wrote in the accompanying caption: “Because of this man, I am cancer free!!!”

Already feeling better for the past few weeks, Rockett is slowly getting back into Brazilian jiu-jitsu, riding his motorcycle and taking care of his kids. He hopes to go back on tour with Poison again soon.

Rockett also wants to get the word out about immunotherapy — to those who have already exhausted other treatments like he did, but also to people newly diagnosed with cancer who might be able to avoid chemo and radiation.



Rockett at a jiu-jitsu class last month (June 2016). Image provided by Rikki Rockett

“My hope going forward is that by talking to other cancer patients, I might be able to lessen their pain and suffering,” Rockett said. “I know from experience that chemotherapy and radiation are not fun. If I can help anyone else, it would help give reason to what I went through.”

About Rockett’s treatment

One of Rockett’s immunotherapy drugs is pembrolizumab (Keytruda), an antibody that inhibits the abnormal interaction between the molecule PD-1 on immune cells and the molecule PD-L1 on cancer cells, effectively releasing the “brake” and allowing the immune cells to recognize and attack tumors. Pembrolizumab is FDA-approved for some cancers, such as melanoma, but not Rockett’s oral cancer. The other experimental immunotherapy drug he receives in the trial is epacadostat, which inhibits the IDO pathway. This cellular system suppresses immune cell function and allows tumors to evade the immune system. The trial is sponsored by the company Incyte. Rockett will continue therapy in the trial until its completion.

Cohen cautions that these types of immunotherapies for oral and other cancers are still in early-phase clinical trials, and although quite promising, are not quite at the point where they will completely replace the standard of care, which usually involves chemotherapy, radiation and surgery.

About Moores Cancer Center at UC San Diego Health

Moores Cancer Center is one of only 45 National Cancer Institute-Designated Comprehensive Centers in the country. It is also the first and only San Diego-based member of the National Comprehensive Cancer Network, an alliance of the world's leading cancer centers, and is certified by the Quality Oncology Practice Initiative (QOPL), the leading quality program of the American Society of Clinical Oncology.

For adults newly diagnosed with cancer, treatment at an NCI-Designated Comprehensive Cancer Center means superior survival and recovery rates due to the fullness of care, diverse medical, surgical, and radiation oncology sub-specialties, access to breakthrough clinical trials, advanced supportive care and utilization of exacting quality metrics.

Patients have access to therapies, surgeries and clinical trials not offered in community settings. Moores Cancer Center currently operates more than 170 open treatment trials. These investigational therapies include advanced, highly personalized stem cell-based approaches and immunotherapies that leverage the inherent healing powers of the human body.

In late-2016, UC San Diego Health will open Jacobs Medical Center, a 245-bed, 10-story facility where patients with cancer will have access to the Pauline and Stanley Foster Pavilion for Cancer Care, a space dedicated to specialized oncology, and to the A. Vassiliadis Family Pavilion for Advanced Surgery where surgical options include minimally invasive approaches, robotics, transplantation and other combinations of 3D technologies and lifesaving techniques that are only found at UC San Diego Health.

MEDIA CONTACT

Heather Buschman, 858-249-0456, hbuschman@ucsd.edu

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