

THE FRAUDULENT STUDY THAT KILLED THOUSANDS OF BREAST CANCER PATIENTS

by Kristina Gaddy // December 6, 2016

Aurora Langley believed her only hope for a cure back in 1994 was a radical treatment her insurance company didn't want to cover. She had five children, a husband and a life to live, so she enlisted friends, family and her community to raise money to pay for the brutal but hopefully lifesaving treatment. Halfway around the world, one doctor was proving that this treatment was a cost that patients should be willing to endure.

Dr. Werner Bezwoda, after all, was a magician known for curing late-stage breast cancer. In the 1990s, chemotherapy was the hope for a cure — the more the better. At the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa, Bezwoda put women into complete remission, first with a high-dose chemotherapy regimen, followed by bone marrow transplants. He presented his scientific studies at the American Society of Clinical Oncology's meetings and published in major journals — offering results that seemed too good to be true. Trouble was, they were. The results were fabricated, and Bezwoda breached the most basic points of medical ethics, using poor, barely literate Black women in a newly apartheid-free South Africa as his guinea pigs.

Dr. Emil Frei, in the early 1980s, first suggested high-dose chemotherapy followed by a bone marrow transplant as a treatment for breast cancer. At the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, Dr. E. Donnall Thomas had already starting proving that when a patient's cancer-free blood stem cells were removed and then infused after with more chemotherapy — called an autologous bone marrow transplant — he could achieve remission in some blood cancer patients. In 1990, Thomas was awarded the Nobel Prize in medicine for developing the bone marrow transplant protocols, further cementing the idea that these extreme treatments were how we were going to end cancer.

In Johannesburg, Bezwoda began testing a high-dose chemotherapy regimen, and in May 1992, he reported that 51 percent of his patients achieved complete remission. These results were astounding — much better than U.S. or European doctors were achieving — and became the impetus for high-dose chemotherapy as a more standard treatment for advanced breast cancer. Doctors could push the megadose even further with a bone marrow transplant: bringing a patient to the edge of death with toxic chemicals, then infusing them with stem cells in the hopes of bringing them back to life. The fatal flaw? Chemo kills both unhealthy, cancerous cells and perfectly good cells, leaving patients susceptible to infections and anemia. High-dose chemotherapy can also lead to congestive heart failure and irreversible heart damage, or permanent bone marrow damage. But in a world without a cure, women were desperate for a bit of magic.