

NEWS OF THE WORLD

Brave Bernie on trial drug

Bernie Nolan in new drug trial to beat aggressive HER2+ breast cancer



STRONG: Bernie can't wait for her treatment so she can beat cancer

EXCLUSIVE by Douglas Wight
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BATTLING Bernie Nolan last night revealed her breast cancer is an aggressive form of the disease-but she's taking part in a new drug trial to beat it.

The Nolans singer and former Bill star has just found out she is suffering from the HER2+ type-one of the most resistant to chemotherapy.

She will be just one of 15 people in the UK to test new drug pertuzumab in the hope it will shrink the cancer cells attacking her body.

Doctors plan to combine the treatment with wonder drug Herceptin. Brave Bernie, 49, will also have chemo, which is likely to start in 10 days, followed by a mastectomy to remove her left breast.

*As she prepares to begin her battle against the disease, she said: "I want them to zap the cancer before the little s*** has had a chance to get off the ground."*

Bernie exclusively revealed in the News of the World last week that she's the third Nolan sister to be diagnosed with breast cancer-after Linda, 51, and Anne, 59.

On Wednesday, surgeons at the Royal Surrey Hospital in Guildford gave Bernie and husband Steve Doneathy, 49, the devastating news that tests showed her cancer is stage two, grade three-that means it has begun to spread out of her breast to her lymph nodes and is of the fastest growing type.

The mum-of-one admitted: "Before we saw the surgeon, Steve and I were scared to death. The morning before the appointment seemed to last a year. Firstly, my blood tests came clear, which was the first positive thing, because all of the treatment is dependant on you being healthy, so that was great.

"But then surgeon said, 'now about your cancer'. We held our breath. He said it was HER2+ which wasn't so great. I have stage two, grade three, which means it's a fast growing type of cancer.

"It would have been better if it was negative.

"But it means I can take Herceptin, the revolutionary drug for the treatment of breast cancer that we fought so hard to get it in this country."

She continued: "The big news is they asked me if I want to go on a clinical trial for a new drug called pertuzumab - manufactured by the same people who produce Herceptin.

"Both are to prevent the cancer coming back but pertuzumab bolts on to a different area of the breast and gives you an extra boost."

The new drug has previously been tried on those with advanced breast cancer but now docs want to

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test it on patients in the early stages, like Bernie, to see if it can reduce tumours and stop cancer spreading.

If effective, it could even stop the need for radical mastectomies.

Pertuzumab works by preventing the HER2 protein from binding with other cells, a pairing that can lead to cancer cells spreading.

In previous trials, a combination of Herceptin and pertuzumab has even seen some cancerous growths reduce in size.

HER2+ affects around 10,000 women in Britain every year, accounting for 20-30 per cent of all breast cancer cases, and is one of the most resistant strains to chemotherapy.

Bernie said: "There are 15 people who are going to be asked to do it. It's been tried in America and has been tried on people who have the late stages of HER2+. Now they want to try it on people who have this in the early stages.

"There's a chance, if it's effective that in the future it might remove the need for mastectomies completely. That's the hope.

"I feel privileged that I have been asked to be one of those people. I don't want to do it only for myself - if it works they will have gained that knowledge and how great is that?

"There are no counteractive effects so if it doesn't work I won't be losing anything.

"I know it's scary but how can they improve on the treatment of breast cancer if people don't do trials like these?

"So I will start to get this drug when I start taking Herceptin, which is in the second part of the treatment.

"I'm really excited. I can't wait to get started."

She will start chemotherapy first - six rounds over five months - then have a mastectomy in January which might be followed by a bout of radiotherapy.

She said: "The surgeon wants to do it that way round because it's a progressive cancer, so they want to zap it now."

It means Bernie, runner-up in ITV1's Popstar To Operastar, will be finishing her chemo in October, when she turns 50.

She joked: "I'll be very attractive and bald for my birthday. But I don't care what I look like. I just want to live."

Bernie, mum to daughter Erin, who turned 11 last Monday, will also undergo a genetic test on Thursday to see if she is a cancer gene carrier, which will determine if 11-year-old daughter Erin and her three sisters who haven't had cancer-Loose Women star Coleen, 45, Maureen, 55, and Denise, 58-could be at risk.

If she is, Bernie would consider a double mastectomy when she has her op.

She sighed: "The results can take up to six months to come back but because I'm going on the clinical trial I might get them back a bit sooner.

"I hope I will know before January because if I find out I am a gene carrier I would consider a double mastectomy. I can't go through this twice and I'd rather get it all done at the same time. I'd rather get it all done at the same time.

"Maureen and Coleen have discussed being genetically tested after Linda was diagnosed but didn't go through with it. I did go for the test but I was asked at the time whether, if I knew I was a gene carrier, if I would have a mastectomy straight away and I said no. I would never have had a mastectomy unless I had cancer.

"The test costs the NHS money so they said there was no need for me to go ahead with it then.

"But once I have the test, it could be a warning for the other girls - Denise, Maureen and Coleen - and if I am a gene carrier they will need to get tested."

And she added: "But if I am a gene carrier it also affects my daughter Erin. It will mean she is more closely monitored when she is older.

"The positive thing is she'd be called in for more regular mammograms and watched more closely.

"She's been amazing but I still have to watch her. She got upset one night this week. I asked her, 'Do you think I'm going to die'. I told her the whole thing and she was fine.

"But things like that make me angry. One of the things I thought about when I got the news about cancer was that I couldn't believe I was going to be putting my daughter through all of this.

"I didn't want her to deal with cancer at this age. I was really p****d off with myself. But it actually helps that other people in the family have been through it, so it's not such a dirty word.

"But she will have to cope with it and I hope it makes her stronger. I'm always looking for positives from negatives.

"Sometimes I think, 'F***ing hell, why me?' But then quickly I think, 'Why not me? Why should it be someone who might be younger, or someone on their own.

"In a lot of ways I am lucky. I have a great life. I have an amazing husband and a wonderful

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daughter. We love each other unconditionally and we caught this early."

Bernie has inspired fans and well-wishers with her amazingly upfront attitude to her ordeal.

It has won her admiration from the public.

"The response has been amazing," she smiled.

"I'm overwhelmed. I've had hundreds of supportive letters and emails.

"I'm always looking for the positive."

And she will make her most public show of defiance against the disease at the British Soap Awards next Saturday - where she will present an award with sister Coleen by her side.

Bernie joked: "I better do it now before I lose all my hair. It might be my last chance to look really glamorous.

"I haven't decided what I will wear but I don't want it to be black.

"These days I like to wear bright colours and be positive.

"I had been set to present an award before I was diagnosed but when I found out I had cancer I wasn't sure I was ready for that because the one thing I can't stand is pity.

"But then I was in a soap and once won an award for Brookside and I remember how special it was so I feel very privileged to be asked.

"Coleen is going to do it with me and I'm really looking forward to it now."

Bernie, who is also providing samples of breast tissue for research into beating the disease, also had a meeting with an oncologist who talked her through the cocktail of chemotherapy she would be having.

She said: "I'm going to have six blasts of chemo over five months, one every three weeks. Then they change the make-up to a second cocktail.

"That will take me up to October which means I will be very attractive and bald for my 50th birthday then.

"I then have to wait two months until January and that's when I'll be having my mastectomy.

"My oncologist also said they believed they could shrink the cancer or kill it altogether before I even have the surgery. But even though I will still have to have my breast removed because I have so much calcium in there it's a precursor to cancer and I have no choice but to have the surgery.

"I said, 'Fine, just get rid of it'. My surgeon tried to warn me of the side-effects to chemo, that I would lose my hair and my eyebrows and I said, 'I'm not bothered. My sister Linda's had it and I don't care what I look like. I just want to live'.

News of the World doctor Hilary Jones said: "Bernie's cancer needs to be treated vigorously. The trial is for a monoclonal antibody to see if has additional benefits to Herceptin.

"It's great that she's on the trial. Bernie is obviously determined to beat this and she's an amazing inspiration."

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You can beat it Bernie. Hang in there. Love from Australia xxxxxx

By katherine Posted October 5 2010 at 1:48 AM

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