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Christopher Reeve: Israel is at center of world research on paralysis

Christopher Reeve: Israel is at center of world research on paralysis
By ISRAEL21c staff July 27, 2003

Christopher Reeve: Israeli researchers are some of the best in the world.

Israel joins international stem cell forum. Stem cells become working human kidneys in mice. Christopher Reeve Paralysis Foundation, Weizmann Institute of Science, and Proneuron Biotechnologies calling Israel the "world center" for research on paralysis treatment, Christopher Reeve set off for his first visit to the country this week.

Over the course of his visit, Reeve will learn about Israeli advancements in the field of stem cell research related to paralysis and spinal cord injuries.

The theater and film actor who portrayed 'Superman', suffered a horseback-riding accident in 1995 during an equestrian event which left him paralyzed from the neck down.

"I am looking forward to visiting Israel to learn more about their cutting edge paralysis research as well as their approaches to addressing the quality of life of those living with paralysis," said Reeve. "Israel is the center of some of the world's leading research related to paralysis. There are many new therapies in the pipeline as well as care strategies being employed that may also benefit millions of people around the world living with paralysis. This includes therapies derived from stem cell research."

Reeve is the chairman of the Christopher Reeve Paralysis Foundation (CRPF). According to his spokesperson Juda S. Engelmayer, the four-day trip is a scientific, fact-finding mission to learn about Israel's research on treatments for spinal injuries and to visit with people living with disabilities in the region. Reeve plans to meet with Israeli doctors and researchers working on remedies for paralysis caused by spinal cord injuries and other central nervous system disorders.

Reeve is a strong supporter of stem cell research, which some experts believe may unlock a way of reversing the often-debilitating effects of spinal injuries. He believes a cure for paralysis is close at hand.

"Help is on the way, it really is," Reeve said recently. "It's going to transform everything and mean a great deal to people with brain injuries and spinal cord injuries as well," he said.

Accordin to Engelmayer, Reeve specifically requested to meet with neuroimmunologist Michal Schwartz of the Weizmann Institute in Rehovot.

"I think that Israel is one of the countries that is leading the way in medical research, in particular with diseases and conditions that affect the central nervous system. Israeli researchers are some of the best in the world," Reeve told The Jerusalem Post. "She [Schwartz] and some of her colleagues are doing particularly well in treating patients immediately after spinal cord injuries in what is called the acute phase. If a person can be treated right away, within the first 10 days after the injury, it will have dramatic effect in what their life will be."

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Schwartz described her team's approach of therapy as "different than any other group in the world."

The work is being carried out by an Israeli company called Proneuron Biotechnologies, Inc. The therapy, recently completed phase 1 FDA approved clinical studies, demonstrated preliminary promising results with the first patients. With these results, the company is expecting the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to approve plans for Phase II testing of the therapy to begin this summer in the US.

Proneuron's treatment, involves isolation of macrophages from the patient's blood, processing in the laboratory and then injection of the cells into the spinal cord in the vicinity of the area of damage. The treatment, which must be provided within 14 days of spinal cord injury, requires a surgical procedure to open the spine for the injection of the macrophage cells into the spinal cord.

"The technology is based on the individual's own potential within his immune system. It's a revolutionary approach to using the immune system," Dr. David Snyder, Vice-President of Clinical Development at Proneuron, told ISRAEL21c. "We licensed the technology from Weizmann and have turned the idea into an application. And we're in the process of bringing it to the clinic."

The Phase I trials included patients from around the world who were flown to Israel for treatment and follow up - including patients from Holland, Mexico, Poland, and the U.S.A.

"It tells you something. Doctors from all over the world sent their patients to Israel for a month - in the middle of this conflict - and that the families of the patients also came. From a patient perspective - there are no clinical alternatives," said Snyder.

During his visit Reeve is also planning to meet Israelis who have suffered similar injuries to him, including Ethiopian immigrant Elad Wass. Wass was a victim of a suicide bombing in Netanya in May. The shrapnel that entered Wass's abdomen left him paralyzed from the waist down. Wass expressed a wish to meet the actor in a letter, saying that Reeve provided him with "hope and inspiration."

"Israel is a very small country yet there are many people suffering with disabilities. It is a particularly troubled area of the world bombings and shootings have resulted in many injuries and disabilities," said Reeve.

Accompanied by nurses, aides, and a team to meet his day-to-day needs, Reeve will travel on a regular commercial flight. His itinerary includes stops at research centers, hospitals, rehabilitation facilities, and centers for children with diseases and disabilities. He will meet with government leaders and will also tour the sights, including Yad Vashem and the Old City of Jerusalem. According to the organizers of the trip, the Old City tour is specially designed for disabled people.

"Long ago not very much could be done to improve the lives of injured. There were told to go home and live life with no hope for improvement," Reeve said. "In my own case, I was told I would never recover any movement below my shoulders; I have been exercising every day and recovered much more movement than was ever thought possible."

The Christopher Reeve Paralysis Foundation, of which Reeve is chairman, has distributed \$45 million in research grants to neuroscientists throughout the world. In effect, he is kept informed of the progress that scientists are making and is able to confirm that "there is a lot of very promising research going on all over the world."

"When I was injured in 1995, scientists were nowhere near being ready to try therapies on human beings and now in 2003 there are human trials under way and other planned for the near future. I am fortunate to be informed about progress being made and I want to tell others who are disabled about such research," Reeve told The Jerusalem Post.

"There is progress being made in research, there is hope. Scientists are making tremendous progress, not just in spinal cord cases but with all diseases and disorders. Science is advancing rapidly; there are now new therapies, exercises, and equipment. Nothing is impossible. It is important for all of us living with disabilities to try our very best to challenge ourselves to do more. No one should accept it when someone says this is the way you will be forever. The possibilities are limitless."

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