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Promising results from early-stage trials of a new type of treatment offer hope to people with a rare genetic skin-blistering disorder known as EB, which is currently incurable.

EB (Epidermolysis bullosa) occurs in various forms and affects some 10,000 people in the UK. EB is characterized by extreme skin fragility such that blisters form as a result of minor abrasion, or even spontaneously. Not only is the skin fragile, but it fails to heal properly, and this can result in slow-to-heal chronic wounds, with attendant pain, risk of infection and other complications.

One of the more severe forms of EB, recessive dystrophic EB (RDEB), affects an estimated 500 people in the UK, and the constant skin blistering results in disfiguring and disabling scarring, inhibiting movement and day-to-day activities. RDEB is caused by the skin's inability to make normal collagen, a protein that gives skin its strength.

Trials of the new treatment aim to strengthen the skin, and promote rapid healing of blisters which do occur. The treatment involves supplementing the faulty skin of patients who have RDEB by injection of normal skin cells from donors. The donor skin cells are able to make the skin protein collagen type VII, which is either faulty or missing in the skin of people with RDEB.

Professor John McGrath, at Guy's and St Thomas' Hospital London has so far treated eight patients, and of the five whose condition can be evaluated at this time, all show rapid wound healing, and a reduced tendency to blister.

Professor McGrath says "This is the most meaningful clinical intervention I have done in a long time – it is nothing short of remarkable. Some forms of EB can be very debilitating and there is a high unmet medical need for an effective treatment."

This work builds on years of research into understanding what causes EB, and the search for improved treatments and possible cures. DEBRA has supported the research carried out by Professor John McGrath and his research team in this and other important areas of fundamental and clinical research. DEBRA is the patient-support organization that not only funds such research but also provides practical, social and nursing support to patients with EB and their families.

John Dart of DEBRA says: "The results reported by Professor McGrath are exciting and DEBRA is delighted to see the years of painstaking research being translated into treatments that may offer real benefits in improved health and quality of life for people with EB. This has always been our ultimate goal in supporting EB research over the past 30 years. Professor John McGrath was DEBRA's first 'Clinical Research Fellow' at an early stage of his career, and it is very pleasing to see his work coming to fruition. We recognize that taking forward research into the clinic will involve a great deal of further hard work, and the contribution of many partners as well as our dedicated EB researchers and clinicians."

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