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Breakthrough treatment helps prolong life of metastatic lung cancer patients

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Singapore - When lung cancer has spread, or metastasized, to other parts of the body, standard chemotherapy offers only a modest survival benefit. Now, in a major advance described in recent issue of the New England Journal of Medicine, an international team, including researchers from Albert Einstein College of Medicine and Montefiore Health System, report that combining chemotherapy with the immunotherapy drug Keytruda extends the lives of people with metastatic squamous non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) by more than 40 percent compared with chemotherapy alone—a significant improvement that should immediately change the standard of care.

"Immunotherapy is revolutionizing cancer care and this study is further evidence of its power," said Balazs Halmos, M.D., M.S., coauthor on the paper and director of the multidisciplinary thoracic oncology program at the Montefiore Einstein Center for Cancer Care and director of clinical cancer genomics at the NCI-designated Albert Einstein Cancer Center. "Considering that responses in a fraction of these patients have been durable and lasting, we have reason to believe that immunotherapies may one day offer the promise of a cure for some people with metastatic lung cancer."

NSCLC is the most common type of lung cancer, accounting for 85 percent of all cases. There are two main types: squamous and non-squamous NSCLC. This double-blind, randomized controlled trial enrolled 559 patients with metastatic squamous NSCLC. Approximately half the patients were treated with standard chemotherapy involving two chemotherapy drugs plus placebo (the control group) and the other half received two chemotherapy drugs plus Keytruda.

"The pace of discovery in the field of immunotherapy is astonishing," said Dr. Halmos. "Montefiore/Einstein's involvement in cancer clinical trials gives our patients access to the latest advances in treatment."