

Milford tot in Bahamas for cancer therapy

By JUDI DOHERTY

Staff Reporter

Amber Calistro, the 4-year-old Milford girl who is suffering from cancer, was scheduled to arrive today on Grand Bahama Island in the British Bahamas to begin an experimental and controversial treatment program.

Her mother, Patricia Calistro, is confident she has made the right decision about her daughter's therapy.

"If there is a hope for Amber, then this is it," she said just before they left Milford for Florida and the Bahamas.

Ms. Calistro has spent weeks sifting the confusing and often contradictory information about cancer cures and decided to take the girl to the Bahamas for treatment after talking to a number of people who were familiar with the program.

The treatment, called immuno-augmentative

therapy, is offered by the Immunology Researching Center in Freeport on Grand Bahama Island. Headed by Lawrence Burton, the center uses various techniques intended to stimulate the body's natural immune system in fighting the cancer cells.

The treatment schedule is a minimum of two months, Ms. Calistro said, and the family's living expenses will be covered in part by a \$3,000 gift donation from a woman who heard of Amber's plight.

Locally, a fund drive has been under way to raise enough money to send Amber to Disney World in Florida before her illness grows worse. Ms. Calistro said the money that has been raised was used to take Amber to Disney World for a few days before going to the Bahamas to begin treatment.

Ms. Calistro said she has been surprised and touched at the support she has been receiving from friends and strangers alike.

She said she sees Amber as "a symbol for all the people who need help," and when her troubles are over, one way or another, Ms. Calistro said, "I plan on doing a lot for a lot of different people."

The little girl, her mother said, was tremendously excited about the trip, although the strain of her disease is beginning to show.

"She can't sleep," Ms. Calistro said. "She can't unwind. It's as if she doesn't want to be alone with her thoughts."

Amber's battle against cancer began last fall when her mother found a lump behind the girl's right ear. Despite numerous visits to several doctors, the lump was not diagnosed as cancer until the girl was finally taken to Yale-New Haven Hospital in March.

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Doctors at the hospital operated on Amber and found that the cancer had spread to her brain and spine. The physicians prescribed a conventional treatment of radiation therapy and chemotherapy.

Even with treatment, they gave the little girl a 50-50 chance of surviving a year, and a 25 percent chance of surviving five years.

Because of the radiation treatments, Amber's hair has fallen out and her mother comforted her by telling her the "hair fairy" would come at night if she put her tresses under her pillow.

Ms. Calistro said they've been shopping since then for little caps to protect the girl's head from the sun.

She also said that she has detected another lump in the incision where the previous growth was removed.

Although Ms. Calistro had Amber on radiation therapy for several weeks, she chose not to use chemotherapy at all and instead began her search for alternative methods of treating cancer.

Ms. Calistro at one point had considered treating Amber with the controversial Laetrile, a substance made from apricot pits that some claim has an effect on cancer.



With her decision to try Burton's immunotherapy, Ms. Calistro has taken Amber off radiation therapy, against the advice of the girl's physicians at Yale-New Haven.

Ms. Calistro said she has signed an agreement with the hospital releasing it from responsibility in the case.

"I told them I was planning to take her to a doctor for non-toxic therapy," Ms. Calistro said. She added that despite the doctors' medical objections, they have been emotionally supportive in the matter.

"They have offered us terminal care if we want it," she said.