

Saved by maggots

EXCLUSIVE

MIRANDA WOOD

A REPULSIVE medieval treatment is making a comeback in medicine.

Maggots have been used to heal wounds on more than 1400 Australians as a last-ditch attempt to save limbs from amputation. And their ability to feast on dead flesh while leaving healthy tissue alone, could also help combat the antibiotic resistance crisis.

NSW Health Pathology senior scientist Marilyn Geary, the Australian pioneer behind maggot therapy, said the stomach-churning treatment has an 85 per cent success rate.

"It's pretty horrible but it works," she said. "We have a lot of wound consultants and doctors that have used this therapy and, with the right patients and the right wound, they can achieve amazing results."

"You won't convince everybody. There are doctors who think of it as medieval, sort of witchcraft and they don't want any of it in their rooms."

Based at Sydney's Westmead Hospital, Dr Geary is the only supplier of medical maggots in Australia with one application (about 100 maggots) costing \$150 — compared with \$25,000 for an amputation. Nationally about 70 amputations are carried out each week.

Maggots are mostly used to treat



Dr Marilyn Geary at her Westmead Hospital facility that breeds maggots for medical use. Picture: Tim Hunter

VIDEO
MEET MAGGOT MASTER MERILYN
DAILYTELEGRAPH.COM.AU

conditions such as diabetic ulcers and chronic wounds. Apart from eating dead flesh, scientists have discovered the creatures can also kill some species of bacteria.

Dr Geary, who originally bred the maggots from blowflies collected in her Parramatta backyard, now sends the sterile creepy-crawlies to patients across the country.

"The wound consultant puts them on the wound, it's bandaged up and left

for three days. Then the outer dressings are changed and then they'll assess the wound," she said.

NSW Health Pathology Medical Entomology manager Stephen Doggett said with 280 patients diagnosed with diabetes in Australia each day, maggots are a game-changer for ulcers.

"When you're diabetic, your circulatory system is poor so that if you get oral or injected antibiotics, it doesn't go to the site and that's a problem," he said.



Fight for fair deal on cancer

JANE HANSEN

A NEW cancer alliance is launching this week to get a fairer deal for the many cancer sufferers who are missing out on new, lifesaving drugs because they can't afford them.

The National Oncology Alliance, made up of clinicians, patients and pharmaceutical companies, plans to highlight the inequities that exist with patients and lobby the government for fairer treatment.

NOA is calling for changes ahead of the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee meeting on August 17.

Co-chair of NOA, Richard Vines from Rare Cancers Australia, said access to new treatments not listed on the PBS was often determined by a patient's bank balance.

"It's unfair. If you had twin brothers, one with melanoma and another with a rare skin cancer called merkle cell, and both were prescribed the same drug, the melanoma brother would pay \$39 a month and the other would pay up to \$10,000," he said.

NOA plans to release figures on the extent of the problem on Tuesday. NOA is calling on the PBAC to put a new process in place.