

Prostate cancer treatment less invasive, doctor says, but few plans cover it

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A Fredericton urologist wants to make it easier for patients with prostate cancer to access a treatment that may have fewer side effects than surgery and radiation.

Dr. Allan Patrick, chief of urology at the Dr. Everett Chalmers Regional Hospital, said a treatment called high intensity focused ultrasound (HIFU) could benefit some prostate cancer patients.

He's part of a small group of Canadian doctors trained to perform the less-invasive procedure.

Patrick said a probe is inserted into a sedated patient's rectum so doctors can use a computer to focus the energy from ultrasound technology to a precise point.

That focused energy obliterates cancer cells in the patient's prostate.

"These patients go home the same day, and the beauty of this procedure is that there's no surgery and no radiation," said Patrick.

"Since there's no radiation, adjacent structures like the rectum, specifically, aren't irradiated. (Radiation) can cause all sorts of problems for patients, like bowel problems and bleeding and erectile dysfunction."

The procedure takes a few hours and patients are typically back to normal within a couple of weeks. They have to use a catheter for that period and return for frequent checkups, but the recovery time is shorter and has fewer side effects than the common treatments for prostate cancer.

The only catch is the cost - about \$23,000 per treatment. The procedure isn't covered by medicare or most private health plans.

A number of European health services have started covering the cost of the procedure, and Patrick is hopeful Canada will one day follow suit.

For now, he'd like to make the procedure more accessible for patients in Atlantic Canada, who currently have to travel to Toronto for the treatment.

So he's submitted a proposal to the Department of Health that would allow him to set up a HIFU centre in Fredericton.

"It would serve Atlantic Canada and maybe beyond," he said.

"The centre I trained in is in Toronto and they're very busy up there. I have to send my patients up to that facility now, but hopefully we'll be able to treat them here some day."

Toronto resident Robert Abelson said having the HIFU treatment was the right move for him.

He said he believed that having surgery and completing a radiation treatment would have done significant damage to his quality of life.

"Surgery was my last option," he said.

"Reading about the potential side effects (involved with surgery and radiation) like incontinence, erectile dysfunction - it really was not an option I was interested in."

On the day of his procedure, he met with doctors at 7 a.m. and was surprised to find himself resting at home by 2:30 p.m.

Abelson, who now shares his experience as a volunteer with a prostate cancer support group in Toronto, paid for the treatment out of his own pocket.

But he said it was a price he was willing, and able, to pay for his health.

"You sacrifice something. So I didn't buy a new car. I'll ride my car for a couple more years," he said.

"It was a trade off. (And I got the) procedure that I wanted."

People who are looking for more information about HIFU procedures can participate in a web-based seminar June 23 at 6:30 p.m. at www.can-amhifu.com.

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