

New prostate procedure promising

Health

Section: Local

By Steve Bartlett, The Telegram

A handful of prostate cancer patients from this province have opted for a non-invasive treatment that's relatively new to Canada.

"We have six or seven that had it done in the last year," says Dr. Christopher French, a St. John's urologist.

The procedure is known as high intensity focused ultrasound, or HIFU.

It uses an ultrasound beam to heat and destroy tumours.

The technology emerged in the 1950s and has been performed in Europe for more than a decade, but it has only been offered in Canada for five or six years.

It remains unknown to many and French is trying to help raise awareness.

"It's a little different in that it's not invasive, it's not surgery, it's not radiation, and there's no actual cutting or needle that goes into the tissue," he explains.

HIFU is not available in Newfoundland and Labrador, but French has trained in it and is considered the local expert.

Besides being non-invasive, he says recovery time for the outpatient procedure is better than surgery and radiation.

As well, the precision of the technology helps lower instances of erectile dysfunction and incontinence, common side-effects of prostate cancer procedures.

"Patients can recover real quick with this and there is some data suggesting that a slight improvement when it comes to quality of life," says French, noting one in eight men in Newfoundland and Labrador are at risk of developing prostate cancer in their lifetime.

Still, the urologist stresses HIFU is not for everyone who needs a prostate tumour removed or treated.

He also notes some men with the disease don't require treatment, that they can be watched over time.

The nearest clinic offering the new procedure is in Fredericton, N.B.

French says most of patients from this province go to a clinic in Toronto where he trained in HIFU last year.

His interest in it was piqued by patients who had inquired about it.

So he followed a couple of them to the Ontario facility and learned from the specialists there.

HIFU is not covered by MCP and, according to French, can cost up to \$25,000.

He acknowledges price is a limiting factor, but says it's exciting that men with prostate cancer have another treatment option available.

Although HIFU has been approved by Health Canada, he points out the treatment is undergoing trials comparing its success to surgery and radiation.

He says initial results are promising, but that it will take five or 10 years before the findings are conclusive.

People wanting more information on HIFU can take part in a free online presentation June 23 at 7 p.m.

They can register by visiting www.can-amhifu.com.

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