

Praying Doctors, New Technology Lead the Fight Against Cancer

A decade ago, doctors had no idea of the technology on the horizon that would help them take on cancer. Today, Norfolk, Virginia's Bon Secours Cancer Institute is a faith-based health system that helps patients beat their cancer in a way that's light years ahead of the past.

Unfortunately, cancer is still prevalent in our society. Four out of 10 Americans will learn they have cancer sometime during their lifetime.

The good news is that diagnosis isn't what it used to be. Today's cancer treatments offer greater hope than ever before, both with increased cure rates and fewer side effects.

Tackling Those Nasty Side Effects

Like millions of men diagnosed with prostate cancer, Dennis Jones was not only concerned about getting rid of the cancer, but also about the possible side effects of surgery, primarily incontinence and impotence.

"My name's written in the Lamb's Book of Life. I know where I'm going to spend eternity," he explained. "But my life on earth here, I want to be as productive as I possibly can."

Dr. Bradley Prestidge, a radiation oncologist at the Bon Secours Cancer Institute, said Jones and prostate cancer patients like him have every right to be mindful of the chief possible side effects he referred to as "the two 'I's.'"

"Incontinence, if it's a problem for you, you could be leaking urine all day, every day for the rest of your life. And that could be a much bigger problem than having problems with

sexual function,” he explained.

Jones chose a procedure called Brachytherapy Seed Implants, a treatment offered at the Bon Secours Cancer Institute, and was thrilled with the results.

“I’ve been blessed to say that I haven’t experienced any of those side effects,” he said.

How Brachytherapy Works

Dr. Prestidge says Brachytherapy Seed Implants occur when doctors place tiny radioactive pellets inside the prostate.

“We place needles into the prostate. The patient is asleep of course when we’re doing this,” he explained. “And then we are able to slide these tiny pellets through the needles inside of the prostate so they radiate from the inside out.”

“And we find that’s very effective because that’s where the cancer is. So we’re killing the cancer from the inside,” he said. “But also we can make it so it’s so conformal to the target so the normal tissue, the bladder, the rectum, gets very little dose and has no complications for the patient.”

Brachytherapy Seed Implant treatment only takes a couple of hours, according to Dr. William Rawls, a urologist at the Bon Secours Cancer Institute, who says most patients only need one treatment.

“I really see the advantage of Brachytherapy in the one-and-done principle and just get all the radiation in at once, put up with some side effects for a brief period of time, and then the treatment is done,” he explained.

“And all we do is we observe to make sure that the treatment worked and it is amazing to see the results,” he said.

Patients who opt for Brachytherapy usually enjoy the same results as people who choose surgery for their prostate

cancer. Often that includes reduced PSA numbers. PSA is a blood test, where higher numbers indicate greater prostate cancer risk.

Dennis Jones said he is pleased at his PSA numbers after his seed implant procedure.

“Well my numbers were at one point 16, 13 to 16 or more,” he recalled. “And today it was . Those are good numbers by the way. Those are very good numbers. I’m very excited about that, and I thank God for leading me to the right physicians.”

The Power of Praying Doctors

Those doctors regularly thank God, too. Bon Secours is the only faith-based health system in Virginia, according to Scott Hurley, vice president of Bon Secours Hampton Roads Foundations.

“We take care of are people who really can’t afford to pay,” he explained. “And so we really see this as a mission where we’re reaching out and taking care of those people because it really is a ministry trying to bring healing to both the spiritual and body. People pray for patients, really care about the patients.”

Part of that care is pursuing technology that protects the body from aggressive treatment. While seed implants radiate from inside, what’s known as “True Beam” works from the outside-in. With the latest radiation techniques, the key is precision. New tools better isolate the tumor, thereby protecting the healthy tissue surrounding it. That means higher doses of radiation can be used.

Computer software helps True Beam hit the tumor from every angle, constantly adjusting to its shape.

When Annie Heichel learned she had breast cancer, she assumed the worst.

"My emotions were, I was going to go without two breasts real fast," she said. "I was going to have to accept the fact that at my age I wasn't going to need them anymore."

Happily, she was wrong. Breast cancer treatment isn't what it once was, according to Dr. Charles Ives, a breast surgeon at Bon Secours Cancer Institute.

"Nowadays the majority of patients don't need a mastectomy," he said. "They can have lesser surgery, a lumpectomy, or what we call a partial mastectomy, which then involves radiation therapy which helps minimize the recurrence."

"The long term results of a partial mastectomy or lumpectomy are just as good as a mastectomy," he said.

A Promising New Procedure

When Dr. Ives removes a tumor, he puts a small object called a Biozorb where the tumor was. It's a relatively new procedure.

"There are a lot of surgeons that don't know about it yet," he said. "A lot of patients I think that don't know about it."

In X-rays, the Biozorb helps pinpoint the tumor's location so doctors know exactly where to radiate.

Ives says another benefit of the Biozorb is it's ability to make breasts look normal, post-surgery.

"You're taking a portion of the breast out. You're leaving an empty space. And that can distort the breast," he explained.

"But this device is a three-dimensional device, and so you're putting it right where the tumor was, and that provides some scaffolding or buttress to the breast to decrease the amount of deformity that you might be causing."

Heichel said people who, like her, think breast cancer treatment is the same today as it was in years past, will be

pleasantly surprised.

“Everything they have out there for you , especially this Biozorb,” she said. “You can go in, have surgery in the morning, come home in the afternoon, and go to work the next day. It’s just that simple.”

So while a cancer diagnosis can be traumatic, new treatments can often lead to better cure rates than before, with fewer complications.

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