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FOOD & LIVING

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Scope is improving cancer outlook

by Monica Orosz
Daily Mail staff

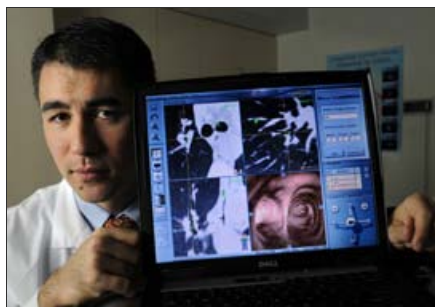
SOUTH CHARLESTON, W.Va.--The patient who came to see Dr. Tom Takubo at his South Charleston pulmonary practice essentially had been given a death sentence.

She had a spot on her lung that most certainly was malignant. But doctors would not agree to aggressive chest-opening surgery or even radiation treatment because the patient also suffered from impaired lung function. Aggressive treatments were too risky.

Takubo was able to help using new technology that his practice at Thomas Hospital has had for about a year and a half in which a tiny scope is able to access virtually all parts of the lungs to both diagnose spots on the lungs and, if they are cancerous, to help radiologists treat them in a much more focused manner than has been done in the past.

The female patient underwent five days of radiation therapy during which she told Takubo she felt well enough to work in her garden every day.

"It's really completely changed the face of pulmonary medicine," said the 37-year-old Takubo, who grew up in Logan County and saw his stepfather, a coal miner and heavy smoker, die of lung cancer.



Craig Cunningham
Dr. Tom Takubo says new technology that allows him and his partners to diagnose suspicious spots on the lungs with a minimally invasive procedure may help improve the dismally low cure rates for lung cancer. Takubo said Thomas Memorial Hospital currently is the only one in the state that has the equipment, which allows him to use a CT scan on a computer screen and a small scope to access a patient's lungs.

The technology has a long name - electromagnetic navigation bronchoscopy - though the actual device is a tiny scope. The patient is sedated for the 30-minute outpatient procedure and usually reports feeling nothing more than a slightly irritated throat after.

When Takubo and his partners started using the device, called the superDimension inReach System, it was considered experimental technology. But that is changing and in early 2010, it should become easier for patients to receive insurance approval and for doctors to receive reimbursement.

Takubo's practice currently is the only one in the state using the technology that is available in 200 hospitals in the country. By the end of next year, 100 more are expected to offer it and Takubo likely will be training West Virginia physicians as they start using it.

"Everybody will get it eventually," he said.

No only is the procedure much less expensive than costly surgery, but it is much more comfortable for the patient, Takubo said, especially when one considers that in half the cases where a patient undergoes chest-opening surgery to biopsy a lung spot, the spot actually is benign.

Takubo likens the technology to a GPS for the lungs. And to help perfect his hand-eye coordination in manipulating the instrument while watching a computer screen, he plays video games.

Takubo believes the inReach System has great implications for improving the cure rates for lung cancer.

Lung cancer kills more people than any other type of cancer and while cure rates for other types of cancer such as colorectal, prostate and breast have seen major improvements in the last 50 years, the cure rate for lung cancer is dismal at just 15 percent.

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"There's a lot we can cure if we catch it early," Takubo said. "But once it has spread, it's over. That's why I'm so excited about this technology."

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