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Procedure offers time, hope for liver cancer patients

KANSAS CITY, Kan. – Millions of little glass beads, each about one-half the diameter of a human hair, and filled with radioactive material, are some of the latest tools in the fight against cancer, specifically liver cancer.

The beads, named TheraSpheres, are approved by the FDA for the treatment of hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC), the most prevalent form of primary liver cancer. Only a few centers in the country offer the treatment, including The University of Kansas Hospital, where Dr. Philip Johnson, an interventional radiologist, has been trained in the procedure.

“It is similar to treatments for other cancers, but this is the first for liver cancer. We are able to target tumors and cut off the blood supply to it by pinpointing radiation directly at it,” Johnson explained

The American Cancer Society estimates there were 19,150 new cases of liver cancer in 2007, including HCC. Over 16, 000 people will die from the cancers and those numbers are expected to grow, particularly because of the increased incidence of Hepatitis C, a leading cause of HCC.

The treatment was approved by the FDA and by European agencies in 2006 and Johnson said the three-year survival rate has been good. To bring the procedure to the Kansas City area, Johnson and a radiology team from The University of Kansas Hospital traveled to Chicago for training in the procedure and Johnson reports the local results have been as good as nationally.

“We have found it to be effective in prolonging and improving the quality of life on a number of patients we previously wouldn’t have been able to help,” said Johnson.

There are benefits to the use of TheraSpheres including a minimum of side effect and it does not prevent blood flow to through the arteries, resulting in less toxicity and pain. Because of these facts, it can be repeated on some patients. The procedure can also be done on an outpatient basis and is usually performed in a radiology suite with patient conscious throughout the event.

There is a similar procedure available for colon cancer and Johnson said the trend may continue into other cancers as well.

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“It is hard to predict, but with the success we are having here there is hope that more expanded treatments for liver and other cancers may soon be available,” Johnson said.

The University of Kansas Hospital is the region's premier academic medical center, providing a full range of care. The hospital is affiliated with the University of Kansas Schools of Medicine, Nursing and Allied Health, and their various leading edge research projects. The constantly growing facility contains 508 staffed beds and serves more than 21,000 inpatients annually.

The University of Kansas Hospital comprehensive heart program is ranked 30th in the nation by U.S. News & World Report and is housed in the state of the art Center for Advanced Heart Care. The cancer program is based in the region's largest outpatient cancer facility, the University of Kansas Hospital Cancer Center and Medical Pavilion, located in Westwood, Kansas, 1 ½ miles from the main hospital.

The hospital has received Magnet nursing designation, reflecting the quality of care throughout the hospital, an honor awarded to only 3.5 percent of the hospitals nationwide. The hospital also houses the region's only burn center and the area's only nationally accredited Level I Trauma Center.

TheraSphere Yttrium-90 microspheres are manufactured by MDS Nordion.

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