

Brachytherapy Improves Tongue Cancer Outcomes

There was a time not long ago when the treatment for base of tongue cancer necessitated the surgical removal of the entire tongue and possibly also the larynx. This treatment left the patient with only a 50% cure rate, significant cosmetic damage and the devastating loss of ability to communicate and swallow normally. Today, thanks to the contributions of physicians like **Dr. Louis B. Harrison**, Chairman of Radiation Oncology at Beth Israel Medical Center and St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center, patients with tongue base cancer have cure rates between 80% and 90% and their organs are left intact.

"One of our most important goals in head and neck cancer is treating patients in such a way as to maximize both their cure rate and their physical function and appearance," Dr. Harrison says. "Philosophically, this is at the very core of what we do."

"Head and neck cancer is different than any other area of the body," explains **Dr. Roy B. Sessions**, Chairman of Otolaryngology/Head & Neck Surgery at Beth Israel. "There is so much impact on quality of life. It's so visible. You can't hide it with a blouse or a shirt."

Together, Dr. Harrison and Dr. Sessions have led the effort to set new standards in head and neck cancer treatment by developing interdisciplinary strategies among specialists in medical oncology, radiation oncology and surgical oncology. "We've eliminated territoriality," says Dr. Sessions. "The seamless interaction between various specialties is the standard of care in 2001."

Prior to this type of interdisciplinary approach, cancer patients frequently ended up getting treatment based on the type of specialist they happened to see first. A radiation oncologist would recommend radiation, while a surgical oncologist would recommend surgery. The fact is that many cancers respond to various techniques and the response depends on factors such as location of the tumor and age of the patient. "We tailor the treatment to the patient. It's a win-win situation," explains Dr. Harrison. His colleague Dr. Sessions agrees, "This is the ideal way to treat cancer."

While traditional surgical techniques are still considered an essential part of cancer treatment, there is a greater emphasis on organ preservation through non-surgical and minimally invasive techniques. One of the most successful approaches—called brachytherapy—was pioneered by Dr. Harrison in the treatment of tongue base cancer.

"We've developed an approach using non-surgical treatment for cancer of the base of the tongue by combining external radiation, given over several weeks, followed by the brachytherapy procedure," explains Dr. Harrison. In the brachytherapy procedure, radioactive seeds are temporarily implanted into the tumor. The seeds deliver high doses of radiation to the tumor and minimal doses to the surrounding tissue. "The combination of these two treatments has provided us with tumor control rates in the 80% to 90% range."

Dr. Sessions agrees. "Treatment of base of tongue cancer is one of the most successful examples of the use of brachytherapy to preserve organs and maintain functionality." For many head and neck cancer patients this is life-changing and life-improving news. ■

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Doctors Harrison and Sessions are leading the effort to set new standards in treating head and neck cancers.