

Pee Dee Living

New procedure ends need for brain surgery

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FLORENCE — The test results didn't convey good news — nestled deep in the delicate tissues of Claudia Crook's brain was not one, but two rapidly growing tumors.

The cancer in her lungs was spreading, and that meant the Loris resident would soon have to decide between surgery or her disease's own natural course. But, the thought of even the most skilled hands invading the recesses of her brain was worse to her than the intruders already there.

"I don't like the knife," said Crook. "If I had been told I had no choice but brain surgery, I wouldn't have done it."

Luckily, the decisions put before her by Florence neurosurgeon, Dr. James Brennan, included a third option — Gamma Knife Radiosurgery. Though it sounded too good to be true, Crook was amazed to learn that the revolutionary procedure might eradicate the tumors without a single blade ever touching her precious scalp.

In fact, patients report that the procedure is quite comfortable aside from the initial discomfort of a few injections of numbing medicine.

"We administer a local anesthetic just to the areas where we will affix a halo, a lightweight frame used to secure the head," Brennan explained. "After those few injections, that's it — the patient typically feels nothing at all."

Once the halo is in place, the growths are located using imaging techniques like MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) then marked. Next, a specially-trained medical team tailors the treatment to the patient's individual needs.

The actual procedure, which requires no further anesthesia, is generally over in about 30 minutes though it can last up to three hours.

"The patient usually rests on a couch with the head and halo positioned inside a large silver helmet so we can accurately deliver narrow beams of radiation to the target area," said Brennan. "These low-density beams are too weak to cause damage to healthy brain tissue, but they are strong enough to stop the growth of tumors and kill the abnormal cells."

Afterward, the halo is removed and the patient is free to go unless insurance restrictions require an overnight stay. There are generally no side effects, and the only visible signs of the surgery are small bandages where the halo pins were inserted.

Perhaps the most inconvenient aspect is the drive — the only GKR machine is located at Columbia's Richland Memorial Hospital inside the Gamma Knife Center of the Carolinas, a joint venture between HEALTHSOUTH and Palmetto Health Alliance.

However, Brennan's recent certification to perform the procedure has eliminated an extra step for many Pee Dee residents. Because the closest certified neurosurgeon was in Charleston, locally diagnosed patients had to

be referred there before traveling to Columbia for the surgery.

Still, Crook said no distance would have been too far to go to receive the benefits of GKR under the expert guidance of Brennan.

"After three months, my tumors disappeared just like Dr. Brennan told me they probably would," she said. "Though I still have lung cancer, I am glad to have these tumors out of my head where they would have eventually caused me all sorts of problems. Modern technology is wonderful, and Dr. Brennan is my angel."

For more information on GKR and the types of tumors it can treat, call Brennan's office at Florence Neurosurgery and Spine, (843) 673-0122, or visit www.rmh.edu/tour/gam-maknife.html.