



Dr Tom Pickles outside the BC Cancer Agency in Vancouver

Weigh up all options before making a decision on treatment.

Dr Tom Pickles is a Radiation Oncologist from the BC Cancer Agency in British Columbia, Canada. He specialises in patients with prostate cancer and other genitourinary cancers. Here Dr Pickles shares his experience of radiation therapy treatment, including the benefits, cure rates and side effects, as well as common misconceptions around the treatment.

For many years the long held notion in prostate cancer treatment was that a radical prostatectomy was *'the gold standard'* and this seems to have led to an over confidence in a surgical pathway meaning that other valid treatment options may not have been considered for patients.

"Many men feel that cutting the cancer out with surgery is the best treatment. And it sounds as if it should be – cut it out, it's gone, right? Well, actually no."

A recent survey of patients at Dr Pickles' institution who have pursued a surgical treatment found that a quarter of patients had incomplete removal of cancer when they have surgery- referred to as positive margins. This resulted in additional radiation therapy required to complete the procedure. The reason for the positive margins was largely due to the surgeon endeavouring to minimise damage to surrounding nerves and tissue in order to minimise side effects which meant that some cancer may reoccur.

Dr Pickles says surgery for prostate cancer can have some significant side effects of impotence or incontinence, but not necessarily better success rates of patients remaining cancer free whereas radiation therapy has a favourable profile both in terms of treating the cancer as well as reducing toxicity – side effects associated with treatment.

“Radiation therapy can give the equivalent, or in some cases better, cure rates with the same or often less toxicity. For many of my patients with prostate cancer, the cure rates are identical, the side effects are different, but quality of life studies have shown the side effects tend to be less intense than for the guys who go through surgery.”

Whilst surgical procedures can require extended time for patients to recover, Dr Pickles’ patients will often be active a few days after radiation therapy.

“A day or so after having brachytherapy*, patients are back on their feet, walking around. A few days later they’re going out to the golf course and after a couple of weeks there are really no restrictions on their activities. The guys who have surgery are only in hospital a day or so, but recovery is much slower. A catheter in place for a couple of weeks, and they can’t do anything physical for 4-6 weeks.”

“I think it’s important for any man facing a diagnosis of prostate cancer or indeed any patient with any cancer, to have the opportunity to see a specialist in not just surgery, but also in radiation oncology to discuss options.”

**Brachytherapy is radiation delivered from a tiny source implanted directly into or next to the tumour. This treatment reduces damage to surrounding healthy tissue and limits side effects.*