

To improve radiotherapy for patients, we need to improve its profile

August 28 2015, by Diana Tait



Most people have heard of radiotherapy, and know that it's a type of cancer treatment involving radiation, often used alongside surgery and/or chemotherapy.

This isn't surprising, as radiotherapy for treating cancer has been around for the best part of a century. And during this time, the technology has

evolved beyond recognition – radiotherapy is now a truly cutting-edge cancer treatment.

But fewer people are aware of these new, advanced types of radiotherapy. If you read this blog regularly then you probably are. But what about the rest of the population? To find out, the Radiotherapy Awareness Programme (RAP, which I chair) recently launched a survey to find out just how much people in the UK did know about the newer forms of radiotherapy.

And we were surprised to see that the answer was "not much".

Hearing about new technology

Today's new figures are similar to those from a survey carried out in 2011 –when fewer than one in ten people thought of radiotherapy as a 'modern' [cancer treatment](#) and, despite enormous advances in technology, just 15 per cent of people thought radiotherapy was 'precise'.

Working as an oncologist, I'm always hearing about new developments in radiotherapy – techniques that can increase the chance of a cure and reduce the chance of developing side-effects. But, clearly, not everyone is getting the same messages. Today's survey reveals a worrying lack of awareness of the latest techniques.

For example, take intensity-modulated radiotherapy, or IMRT. This is an advanced type of radiotherapy that can give different amounts of radiation to different parts of tumours. It can be really precise, reducing the amount of radiation given to healthy cells surrounding a tumour – so reducing side effects and improving things for [patients](#) who receive it.

But our survey showed that just four in every 100 people questioned (4 per cent) had heard of it. And only three per cent – had heard of

'stereotactic' radiotherapy, which gives radiotherapy to a tumour from many different directions, so targets it very accurately.

Of course we don't expect everyone to be an expert in all types of cancer treatments. But let's put this in context. In comparison to their low awareness of radiotherapy, we found that people knew much more about developments in cancer drugs and surgery. Nearly four in 10 (39 per cent) said they'd heard of keyhole (laproscopic) surgery, while nearly a third (28 per cent) had heard of 'personalised' cancer drugs.

This is a paradox: four out of 10 patients whose cancer is cured have radiotherapy as part of their treatment. For chemotherapy, the figure is about one in 10. And this is where awareness is important, and where today's latest figures make me worry. Just one in 10 people want the NHS to prioritise radiotherapy funding, compared with nearly six out of 10 for chemotherapy.

And this lack of awareness matters, for two reasons.

Patients should be feeling the benefit

First, it matters because patients are missing out: we know that not enough cancer patients are getting radiotherapy. And for those people who are getting radiotherapy aimed at curing them (rather than controlling their symptoms), the proportion getting IMRT varies between 22 per cent and 73 per cent across England – that's about 36 per cent on average.

The availability of this type of radiotherapy has got much better in the past few years (largely thanks the Radiotherapy Innovation Fund), but we now know 50 per cent should be getting IMRT no matter where they live – so clearly there is more work to do. We don't have as much data for Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, but we know we have to

improve right across the UK.

To have patients missing out on potentially life-saving treatment is completely unacceptable. We've made such incredible advances in technology, so cancer patients in the UK should be feeling the benefit.

That's why I lead RAP. We are a UK-wide group made up of individuals, organisations and charities, all passionate about promoting the benefits of radiotherapy.

Our goal is to see every [cancer](#) patient in the UK asking their doctor whether advanced types of radiotherapy are suitable for them and if so going on to get the most appropriate and effective type. When we asked people in our survey, just three in 10 (29 per cent) said they'd be very likely to ask. So we've got a long way to go to improve patient knowledge but we passionately believe we can make a difference.

Improving infrastructure

And there's a second reason we want more people to know about the importance of radiotherapy: the UK's radiotherapy services are in desperate need of investment and modernisation.

Over the next three years, 126 radiotherapy machines (called linear accelerators, or Linacs) need to be replaced – some of those urgently. And 58 more will need upgrading so that they can be used to give those advanced treatments that so many patients need.

Because of this, I was pleased to see that the new Cancer Strategy focuses on modernising radiotherapy services – and it's crucial that this happens.

The Strategy is right – we do desperately need investment. And we need

people to help us campaign for this.

That's where RAP comes in: if we can make people as passionate as we are about radiotherapy, they can help us make the case to the UK Government for this investment – and we'll be one giant step further to helping those patients who are missing out on the best types of [radiotherapy](#).

Provided by Cancer Research UK

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