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New equipment to help in fight against head, neck cancer

UHF donates \$1 million, partially raised through national Manuary campaign

EDMONTON – New equipment at University of Alberta Hospital is expected to help local oncology teams treat the growing number of patients diagnosed with head and neck cancer.

The equipment, which arrived this month, includes a tissue scanner, which can obtain molecular information from patient tumours that can be used to tailor treatment plans, and Western Canada's only digital droplet PCR (polymerase chain reaction), which can detect genetic changes in tumour cells using small amounts of cellular material. The digital droplet PCR will be used for research to improve diagnostics. The equipment was purchased with a \$1-million donation through the University Hospital Foundation.

"With the new equipment, we are now the most well-equipped and advanced research lab for head and neck cancer in the country," says Dr. Vincent Biron, a head and neck oncologic surgeon at the University of Alberta Hospital and an assistant professor in the department of surgery at the University of Alberta.

"We hope to improve early detection, increase the accuracy of diagnostics and improve treatments for head and neck cancer," adds Dr. Biron, who's also an assistant professor at the University of Alberta.

Head and neck cancer can start in the lip, mouth, inside the nose, paranasal sinuses, pharynx and larynx. Most head and neck cancer patients present with Stage 3 to 4 cancer and have a survival rate of 75 per cent. Survival rates are between 80 per cent and 90 per cent for patients with early-stage head and neck cancer.

The University of Alberta Hospital head and neck oncology team treats more than 250 new cases of head and neck cancers per year. Of these, 170 patients will receive a major surgical treatment.

While head and neck cancer cases linked to alcohol or tobacco use remain significant, rates linked to human papillomavirus – or HPV, commonly associated with cervical cancer – have local surgeons concerned.

"In Edmonton, the rate of HPV-related head and neck cancer has more than doubled since 1998," says Dr. Biron. "Back then, HPV accounted for 40 per cent of all head and neck cancer; today, it accounts for 80 per cent."

The average age of a patient with HPV-related head and neck cancer is 45, compared to 60 for patients with alcohol- or tobacco-related head and neck cancer.

Daniel Antoniuk was devastated last January when he was told the lump in his neck was caused by a cancerous tumor at the base of his tongue. His cancer, which spread to the lymph nodes in his neck, was associated with HPV.

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Following his diagnosis, the 59-year-old Sturgeon County man required complex surgery in April, and aggressive chemotherapy and radiation from May to July. Now cancer-free, Antoniuk is growing a beard in support of Manuary, a national campaign to raise awareness of head and neck cancer and raise money for research.

“Awareness of HPV-related head and neck cancer is extremely low,” says Antoniuk, who has raised \$7,000 for University Hospital Foundation so far this month.

“As a former teacher, I am so happy to see that HPV vaccinations are available to both boys and girls in school throughout Alberta, but there a lot of young Albertans who missed out on school vaccinations that are at risk. It is time to start talking.”

The University Hospital Foundation also raised funds for this equipment through its 2011 Festival of Trees event.

“The University Hospital Foundation is committed to providing head and neck cancer patients with access to the most advanced equipment and technology,” says Joyce Mallman Law, President of the University Hospital Foundation. “Not only does this support ensure that patients treated in Edmonton have access to the very best head and neck cancer team in the world, our donors are enabling research that is literally changing the face of head and neck cancer – developing new procedures that give patients back their lives.”

The University Hospital Foundation raises funds to support innovation and excellence at Edmonton’s University of Alberta Hospital, Kaye Edmonton Clinic and Mazankowski Alberta Heart Institute.

Alberta Health Services is the provincial health authority responsible for planning and delivering health supports and services for more than four million adults and children living in Alberta. Its mission is to provide a patient-focused, quality health system that is accessible and sustainable for all Albertans.

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