NEW ORLEANS — A team at Ochsner Clinic has developed a therapy that combines surgery and radiation in treating patients with inoperable cancer.

"Intra-operative radiation therapy" gives a patient a high dose of radiation during surgery, while the tumor is exposed, instead of afterward. Planning for the procedure was under the direction of the Ochsner Cancer Institute.

Four patients have received the therapy so far. The first patient to undergo it at Ochsner Foundation Hospital was a 75-year-old woman with a tumor of the pancreas. The successful procedure was conducted in January.

Dr. John S. Bolton, Ochsner surgeon and assistant director of the cancer institute, called the procedure a "new dimension in treating patients with tumors which cannot be surgically removed."

"It's not a panacea, but it does offer greater ability for long-term control of a localized tumor," he said. "In some cases, this might effect a cure when it wouldn't have been possible otherwise."

The new method of combining surgery and radiation involves transporting the patient from the operating room to radiation therapy, then back to the operating room.

The procedure begins in the operating room, where the surgeon determines whether the tumor can be removed.

"If it cannot be removed and it is confined to a local area, we temporarily close the abdomen (or chest) so that it remains sterile and take the patient, under a variety of precautions and safeguards, to the radiation therapy department," Bolton said.

The patient is again prepped and draped, the incision is reopened, and an appropriate, targeted dose of radiation is focused directly on the exposed tumor.