New prostate cancer treatment available

NEW ORLEANS — A small Southern company hopes to stifle renewed interest in surgery as the definitive treatment for prostate cancer, which strikes one man in three over the age of 50.

Theragenics Corp. of Atlanta, Ga., has developed the first new radioactive isotope for the treatment of prostate cancer in 20 years. Many of the radiation therapists attending the 30th annual meeting of the American Society for Therapeutic Radiology and Oncology here are hearing about “Theraseed” for the first time, as it has just been FDA-approved and on the market since June.

Theragenics Corp. developed the new radioactive isotope, palladium-103, commercially dubbed “Theraseed,” for direct implant into cancerous tumors — specifically for use in prostate cancer and head and neck cancers, said marketing director Chris Jacobs.

“I’m sold on it,” said Dr. Larry Doss, a radiation therapist from Phoenix, Ariz. Doss has implanted the seed in two patients with head and neck tumors and has a number of other cancer patients lined up for the procedure.

“My first patient had a large tumor in his neck which was resistant to (external) radiation treatments. He was in a lot of pain, so I chose the implant, hoping only to relieve his pain. Within two days, the pain was gone. Within eight days, he had gained seven pounds because he could eat again. Within 17 days — the half-life of the isotope — there was no pain, his weight was stable, and the tumor was nearly gone.

“I was quite surprised. I never saw or expected such a good response. And there were no significant side effects. The second patient had a similar response,” Doss said.

While the therapist said he does not expect Theraseed to replace other cancer treatments, it is a good alternative for those tumors not responsive to traditional chemotherapy and external radiation treatments.

The palladium isotope has a number of advantages over earlier iodine isotopes and over surgery, Jacobs said. With a half-life of 17 days, it can deliver a higher dose of radiation over a shorter time span without significant damage to surrounding healthy tissue.

The one-time implant procedure can be performed on an outpatient basis without the extended and expensive recovery time incurred by traditional surgery.

“When you can treat cancer in an afternoon, you’ve got a winner,” Jacobs said.

Furthermore, under clinical trials, the implant reported the same success rate as surgical removal of the tumor — without the incontinence and impotence that commonly have affected surgical patients in the past, she said.