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Fort Worth patient first in North Texas to undergo robot-assisted surgery for removal of lung tumor

DALLAS – Dec. 21, 2009 – When Craig Harrison found out he would be the first patient in North Texas to have robot-assisted lung-tumor surgery, an operation performed at UT Southwestern Medical Center, he wasn't nervous at all.

"I know most people would've been, but I was actually excited about it," Mr. Harrison said. "I had a rare chance to help other people."

Dr. J. Michael DiMaio, associate professor of cardiovascular and thoracic surgery at UT Southwestern, performed the groundbreaking surgery using the DaVinci system, a four-armed robot controlled by the surgeon via a joystick. The DaVinci provide a wider array of surgical manipulations within a smaller incision than are available in traditional thoracic surgeries.

"A lot more procedures are now done with smaller incisions, which decreases pain and the length of hospital stays," Dr. DiMaio said. "The robot offers easier access to the lung, with more flexibility and rotation than standard tools."

Mr. Harrison's surgery revealed a benign tumor – a bright point in an otherwise grueling decade for him and his family.

"I'm pretty much ready to put the 2000s behind me," he said, and for good reason. The 48-year old Arlington man lost his house in a 2000 tornado that caused widespread destruction in Tarrant County. Just four years later, he was diagnosed with colorectal cancer.

Gastrointestinal symptoms had plagued him for years, but the diagnosis shocked him. He was only 42 at the time, and the bad news got worse. A year after his initial surgery to remove a large tumor from his colon and several feet of lower intestine, Mr. Harrison's doctors discovered that it had metastasized to his liver.

"They found a big mass on my liver, so I had radio-frequency ablation followed by radiation and systemic chemotherapy to treat that," Mr. Harrison said. "It was pretty terrible."

His wife, Kim, helped care for him at home while he recuperated from the series of treatments. In pain almost all the time, Mr. Harrison finally was told he was in remission.

Scans, however, soon revealed that Mr. Harrison had new spots, potentially cancerous, on his right lung. His cancer doctors in the mid-cities recommended more radiation and chemotherapy, but

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Mr. Harrison decided to seek a second opinion, which brought him to UT Southwestern.

Dr. Udit Verma, assistant professor of internal medicine in hematology-oncology, took over his treatment. Together, they decided surgical removal of the tumors would be the best option, so Mr. Harrison met with Dr. DiMaio. Mr. Harrison says he felt this procedure was a superior option, and he was motivated to try something new.

“I was dead set against radiation on my lungs,” he said. “I’d already been through that before on my abdomen, and I didn’t want to do it again. I was grateful that Dr. Verma and Dr. DiMaio recommended it.”

The incisions were small, and surgeons did not have to use a rib spreader to remove the tumor, which was situated on Mr. Harrison’s right lung, just inside the ribcage. Using the DaVinci system, Dr. DiMaio was able to remove the entire mass.

“For some patients, robot-assisted surgery is an excellent option,” said Dr. DiMaio. “The technique combines patient-centered advantages plus good visuals and more flexible access in the field of operation.”

Mr. Harrison said from his vantage point, the surgery was a success. The next big milestone is to remain cancer-free.

“Cancer will always be on my mind. It could always come back,” he said. “But we’ve won a huge victory, and I’m finally starting to imagine my life without cancer.”

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