What’s the Difference Between a Radiologist and a Radiation Oncologist?

By Jan Manarite, VP of Advocacy & Education.

A Radiologist is a physician you probably never meet, yet still impacts the understanding and treatment course of your cancer. He reads and interprets your imaging or your radiology exams. In prostate cancer, radiology exams include CT Scan, MRI, and X-ray (most commonly). Ultrasound would also be considered radiology, but in the case of prostate cancer, most urologists do their own ultrasounds and don’t use radiologists. There are other imaging techniques which are called “nuclear medicine” because they require an injection that is radioactive or a “radio-pharmaceutical.” Nuclear medicine imaging in prostate cancer includes Bone Scans (both the T99 and the F18) and all PET Scans (C11 Choline, C11 Acetate and F18 or Sodium Fluoride). Read more in Monday’s blog for the difference between a radiologist and a nuclear medicine physician.

Now, to complicate issues just a little more….there are Radiologists who DO see patients, therefore they treat prostate cancer, but they are the exception to the rule. Sometimes they are referred to as interventional radiologists. In our world of prostate cancer, some familiar names would include Dr. Duke Bahn in CA who is known for cryotherapy (cryo) and focal cryo, Dr. Fred Lee in MI (retired) who did the same, and Dr. Gary Onik in FL who also does cryo and focal cryo. There are also radiologists like Dr. Aytekin Oto in Chicago who are doing work in focal laser treatment for prostate cancer. (Note – focal treatments treat part of the prostate as opposed to all of the prostate.)
Now – on to the **Radiation Oncologist**. This is the physician who **administers your radiation treatments for cancer**, so this is much different than a radiologist. Since there are so many types of radiation treatments in prostate cancer, I will not attempt to name them all. But at the very least, think of daily radiation treatments to the prostate and short term radiation to metastatic disease as common treatments given by radiation oncologists. There is also radioactive seed implantation to the prostate (brachytherapy) which involves both the radiation oncologist and the surgeon (urologist).

One last type of radiation that a radiation oncologist may administer is an injectable radiation for bone metastases called Xofigo (radium 223). This is for men who are metastatic and on hormone therapy. As you may know, this is called mCRPC or metastatic castrate-resistant prostate cancer. The other type of physician who might also administer Xofigo is a Nuclear Medicine Physician.

Simply understanding the differences between physicians can help you in your research and help you decide who to make an appointment with. This is all part of patient empowerment – we hope this explanation is helpful to you.

*Watch for the next blog – What is the difference between a Radiologist and a Nuclear Medicine Physician...*