Colorectal Surgery to the Forefront

St. Paul’s Hospital is a national leader in care, research and teaching to treat Canada’s second-deadliest cancer and other disorders of the gastrointestinal tract.

by Gail Johnson

As an entrepreneur, husband and father of a six-year-old, Tim Roddick has long been used to managing a hectic schedule. But a few years ago, some unusual symptoms became too troubling for the Vancouver resident to put aside.

At first, his doctor told him that the blood in his stool was merely the result of hemorrhoids. But then, he started experiencing fevers. His symptoms persisted for more than a year, at which point Roddick discovered that what he had was in fact far more serious. In May 2008, Roddick was diagnosed with a rare form of colorectal cancer.

“It was a bit of a shock,” recalls Roddick, co-founder of MSR Innovations, a company that makes solar roofing systems. “It changed things a lot.”

Roddick was referred to Dr. Terry Phang of St. Paul’s Hospital’s colorectal surgery program – which Roddick quickly discovered was one of the best in Canada for treating his illness.

Centre for Excellence in Colorectal Surgery

St. Paul’s Hospital is home to three of B.C.’s eight subspeciality-trained colorectal surgeons – Drs. Phang, Carl Brown and Manoj Raval. Their expertise has resulted in the development of a centre for excellence in colorectal surgery, with a focus on colorectal cancer, inflammatory bowel disease, and other diseases of the lower gastrointestinal tract.

Thanks to this concentration of colorectal surgeons and their active involvement in research, the hospital is able to offer patients access to many innovative procedures, including minimally invasive, incision-sparing surgical techniques.

For Roddick, things moved very quickly after meeting Phang. He had surgery to remove a tumour before going on to have radiation plus several sessions of interferon injections. For nearly a year he had a stoma, a surgically created opening in the abdominal wall to eliminate waste, until Phang performed another surgery to reconnect his gastrointestinal tract.

Although the diagnosis initially devastated Roddick and his family, he has enjoyed a remarkable recovery. “I do just about everything I used to do: I ski, swim, ride my dirt bike, and even got back into a race car. Dr. Phang and his staff have been brilliant. He’s absolutely dedicated to what he’s doing, he’s very skilled, and he’s determined – you can’t beat a combination like that.”

Province-wide Impact

A unique provincial resource, St. Paul’s Hospital’s colorectal surgery program provides comprehensive care, including colorectal cancer screening and prevention, sophisticated diagnostic techniques (such as endoscopic tests involving flexible tubes with a small camera on the end), and a full spectrum...
Phang notes that the St. Paul’s Hospital team, in collaboration with the B.C. Cancer Agency, has improved cancer outcomes province-wide by offering educational programs to surgeons throughout B.C.: “We’re the only province that has done this. We’re continuing to lead improvement in colorectal cancer care and are always asking what we can do better.”

INNOVATIVE CARE, RESEARCH AND TEACHING

St. Paul’s Hospital is a leader in transanal endoscopic microsurgery (TEM), a minimally invasive procedure used to remove certain rectal polyps and tumours. TEM can be performed as a short-stay procedure, sometimes without general anesthetic, meaning most patients can go home the same day. The advanced technique spares patients the significant risks and side-effects of major surgery, and their recovery is faster as well.

“Having colorectal surgery is a life-changing event, but TEM minimizes pain and the duration of a hospital stay with no abdominal incision at all,” says Brown.

As a teaching hospital, St. Paul’s Hospital is a training centre for gastroenterologists and general surgeons and advanced therapeutic endoscopy fellows.

“We’re now seeing residents we’ve trained out in practice,” says Raval. “We’re quite proud that we’ve had a role in training future surgeons. By giving them a good, intensive experience we feel very confident that they’ll go out and practise colorectal surgery throughout B.C., and part of our goal is improving care province-wide.”

Phang, Brown and Raval all participate in research programs (including national randomized control trials) to improve outcomes and survival rates in patients with colorectal cancer and inflammatory bowel disease. All three are members of the B.C. Cancer Agency’s Surgical Oncology Network as well as its Colorectal Surgical Tumour Group, which Raval chairs. Brown chairs the agency’s Research Outcomes and Evaluation Committee.

The doctors are quick to point out that many of the world-leading procedures and treatments now available at St. Paul’s Hospital didn’t exist a decade ago, and require highly sophisticated, specialized and often expensive technology. Thanks to the support of many generous donors, St. Paul’s Hospital Foundation has been able to play a major role in ensuring the colorectal surgery program has the technology it needs to be at the forefront of cancer research and treatment.

Aside from the technological advances available to patients, what makes St. Paul’s Hospital colorectal program special is its commitment to the continuum of care.

“We provide a multidisciplinary team approach,” Brown says. “Ward nurses see as many as five to 10 cancer patients a week, so patients have the comfort of knowing that they really understand their issues. Everyone is involved: the nursing team, the gastroenterologists’ team, the stoma-care nurses. It’s a bigger entity than just the surgical aspect.”

Follow-up care is just as important as a patient’s initial appointments.

“We work hard to ensure that colorectal cancer patients get fast access to surgery, but we want to ensure that they get proper follow-up afterward,” says Brown. “Follow-up after chemotherapy is so important. For the following five years or so, they need multiple tests to monitor for recurrence. If they skip this, they can fall through the cracks. A future direction we’re working toward is a colorectal cancer clinic, complete with a nurse navigator to help people with things like body image, sexual functioning and just managing daily life. We know that follow-up saves lives.”

For more information on how you can support care, research and teaching that benefits the health of patients at St. Paul’s with colorectal cancer, colitis and other gastrointestinal disorders, please call 604-682-8206 or visit us online at www.helpstpauls.com.