

Mind & body

The surgeon's art

Da Vinci Robot hailed as the future of prostate cancer treatment



EXPERTISE: Omer Karim is one of only four men in the country qualified to carry out robotic urological surgery. Ref:90399/5

MEN diagnosed with prostate cancer face a much more certain future thanks to a revolutionary new form of surgery which is being hailed as the future of cancer treatment, writes Sarah Crawley-Boevey.

All too often in the past men who underwent operations for prostate cancer – the second most common form of cancer in men – can become incontinent and impotent as the nerves controlling the bladder and penis are so close to the prostate – a male reproductive gland.

But thanks to robotic surgery, an ever-growing part of modern medicine which uses instruments only 5mm big, these side-effects are being limited.

So new is robotic urological surgery that the UK is home to just one team of consultants who are qualified to carry it out.

And one quarter of this team is Omer Karim, a consultant at Maidenhead's private Bridge Clinic in Bridge Road, as well as Heatherwood and Wexham Park Hospitals.

Mr Karim, a dad-of-two from Henley, trained in laparoscopic surgery – in which a small microscopic camera is inserted through an incision in the skin – in Paris and Hamburg and believes he is witnessing an exciting development in cancer operations.

He said: "We carry out the procedure on the NHS at St Mary's Hospital in Paddington so people in Maidenhead who see me can be considered for the robotic surgery through referral.

"Not all operable prostate cancer is suitable for this type of surgery but we are seeing a very high success rate so far.

"The great thing about this type of surgery is

the robot can work on a much smaller scale so limit the damage to the nerves and other structures around the prostate."

Known as the da Vinci Robot, the machine works remotely as the surgeon operates its five arms with his hands from a separate console while looking through a telescope with 3D vision.

The robot's movements can be scaled so if the surgeon wants to do something small and fiddly the degree of movement of the robot is broadened.

It also has seven degrees of freedom so can turn and twist in almost any direction.

So successful is the technique that the French Navy is reportedly considering installing a robot onboard their ships with surgeons on land carrying out the operation from a distance.

But the robots don't come cheap, clocking in at £1million each, before the £100,000 a year maintenance fee and £1,200 per patient for disposable extras.

Mr Karim and his team are currently trying to encourage Primary Care Trusts across the country to fund the technology which will have a massive impact on the surgical outcomes for prostate cancer.

But Mr Karim believes a new approach to detection is needed too. He said: "People in this

country tend to have a head in the sand approach to cancer – if they don't think about it it's not there.

"Hopefully this technology will be more incentive for men to get checked out because if they know it can be cured if caught early, they are more likely to do something.

"The biggest fear for men is that after surgery they will be urine incontinent and impotent but this is not necessarily the case now."

Mr Karim explained there are some men who are more at risk than others, such as young men with a history of the disease in their family, and Afro-Caribbean men.

While he stressed the surgery is not available to every cancer patient, he reaffirmed the importance of being checked.

He said: "Prostate cancer is operable if caught early so I would urge men to get checked."

And there are not only health-related side-effects that are avoided through robotic surgery.

Mr Karim said: "Because we do such a small incision there is minimal scarring and in is not very invasive so patients can be out of hospital in two days and back at work a few days later."

For more information see www.davinciprostatectomy.com and www.roboticsurgery.co.uk.

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REMOTE CONTROL: By sitting at a console away from the patient, the surgeon can work the robot as if it was an extension of his hands. The machine will copy his movements but the degree of movement can be broadened or shortened to control a fiddly area.

Prostate cancer statistics

- Every year more than 30,000 men are diagnosed with prostate cancer and 10,000 men die from it.
- Prostate cancer is now the most common cancer in men in the UK - every hour at least one man dies from the disease.

SYMPTOMS

- A frequent need to urinate, especially at night
- A need to rush to the toilet, so that you may even wet yourself at times
- Straining or taking a long time to finish
- A weak flow
- A feeling that your bladder has not emptied properly
- Pain on ejaculating
- Pain in the genitals
- Lower back pain
- Difficulty in getting or keeping an erection
- Pain in the hips or pelvis
- Blood in the urine

If you have any queries call The Prostate Cancer Charity on 0845 3008383.

To make a donation to The Prostate Cancer Charity call 0208 2227622 or visit www.prostate-cancer.org.uk