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Health news

February 18 2004

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February 16, 2004

American Association for the Advancement of
 Science conference

Scalpel of sound is best method to attack cancer

by Mark Henderson

ULTRASOUND can kill cancer cells quickly and effectively without damaging surrounding tissue, offering a kinder alternative to surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy.

Patient trials in Britain and China have shown that beams of ultrasound can provide doctors with a "virtual scalpel" that allows them to reach deep inside the human body to target and destroy tumours, while leaving healthy tissue alone.

The precision with which ultrasound attacks cancer cells but nothing else means the technique has no apparent side effects, making it a highly attractive alternative to established cancer treatments. At present, tumours are removed surgically and attacked with chemotherapy drugs that are toxic to the rest of the body, or with beams of radiation that can damage surrounding cells.

If the early promise of ultrasound is confirmed, it could become the frontline treatment for many cancers, as it is so well tolerated by patients and can be repeated many times until a tumour has been killed.

Gail ter Haar, of the Institute of Cancer Research in Sutton, Surrey, said almost 100 patients in Britain had been treated with ultrasound for liver cancer, with positive results. More than 3,000 patients in China have also received the therapy, for cancers of the liver, breast, kidney, bone, soft tissues, pancreas and uterus.

"Clear evidence of tissue destruction in the treated volume has been seen with both systems, with no side effects having been observed," she told the American Association for the Advancement of Science conference in Seattle yesterday.

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“High intensity focused ultrasound (HIFU) has been combined with other therapies which makes definitive conclusions difficult to draw.” She said that there is evidence that HIFU may have a role to play in the non-invasive treatment of some soft tissue cancers.



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