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**Reviewing prostate cancer therapy**

**DR. GOTT**

**PETER GOTT, M.D.**



DEAR DR. GOTT: I would like information on cancer of the prostate. My husband's doctor has recommended a bladder check, bone scan and six weeks of radiation; yet, at the same time, he tells us nothing can be done since my husband is 81 years old, and the cancer won't kill him. A doctor at a teaching hospital said his testicles could be removed and that would immediately shrink the cancer. What's your opinion?

DEAR READER: Treatment for prostatic cancer is governed by several factors, including: the patient's age and general health, severity of the cancer and its staging - that is, whether the tumor is contained within the prostate gland or has spread to other organs (metastasized).

Your husband's doctor has evidently concluded that a bladder examination (cystoscopy with a lighted tube) and bone scan (to identify possible metastases) should be performed. I suspect your husband's cancer either involved large portions of the prostate gland or had invaded tissues surrounding the gland.

Thus, efforts to identify the extent of the problem are in order. Also, radiation therapy is often a good way of treating metastasis; these X-ray treatments usually relieve pain and shrink areas of tumor.

I wish the doctor would take the time to discuss the problem with you. Radiation therapy is doing something, and, despite your husband's age, he has other options, too. For example, female hormone pills often suppress tumors of the male reproductive tract, including prostatic cancer, even if it has spread.

In addition, the second doctor is correct; castration alters cancer-growth and should be considered if the malignancy has metastasized, making radiation treatments technically difficult and potentially dangerous because of the high doses of X-ray required.

Castration, medically termed "orchectomy," is not ordinarily recommended for men who are sexually active; it causes impotence.

Hence, your husband has at least three choices of treatment: radiation, medication and/or orchectomy. Of course, he may choose to do nothing until he develops symptoms of metastases, such as pain. Some prostatic cancers are slow-growing and, when discovered early, do not require immediate treatment.

If your husband is in poor health, treatment programs may be limited or simply ill-advised. For instance, hormone therapy can sometimes worsen the symptoms of heart disease. Further, since many treatments for prostatic cancer are palliative (they relieve symptoms but do not cure), patients may choose to avoid the inconvenience, expense and discomfort of therapy, preferring instead to obtain limited treatment as the need arises.