



## PRESS RELEASE

# New Surgical Program Benefits Throat Cancer Patients

*Less invasive technique helps patients to avoid radiation and keep swallowing*

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

**April 22, 2013 — Albuquerque, NM (UNM Cancer Center)** — Throat cancer patients in New Mexico have a new option for treatment thanks to Andrew Cowan, MD, PhD, who is starting the trans-oral robotic surgery (TORS) program at the University of New Mexico Cancer Center. A UNM Assistant Professor of Surgery, Dr. Cowan will now be able to remove tumors in the back of the mouth and throat without cutting through the jaw. This means his patients will be able to recover faster, with less visible scarring and with less follow up treatment. And, they'll be able to keep swallowing, a function typically damaged with previous techniques.

TORS cuts back on the negative side effects of traditional "open" throat surgeries for patients by cutting fewer muscles of the jaw and throat. The new method allows physicians at the UNM Cancer Center to remove entire tumors through the mouth reducing complications that can arise with such surgeries. Because this surgical technique does not require external incisions, patients keep their swallowing abilities and return to a normal diet within a few weeks.

Patients can also expect less or no radiation therapy since tumors tend to be completely removed. Radiation, which may be used in addition to surgery to treat throat cancers, sometimes damages surrounding muscular tissues, which can impact patients' swallowing abilities. Less radiation to the area helps to keep those muscles healthy and functioning.

"All of this is aimed towards removing patients of cancer with the least amount of long term ill effects," says Dr. Cowan.

This new surgical technique is the first of its kind in the state of New Mexico. Dr. Cowan received his training in TORS at the University of Pennsylvania, where the technique was developed. He is excited to implement the TORS program at the UNM Cancer Center. "It is important that general practitioners and otolaryngologists throughout the state know that we have this technology, and that we can treat these tumors in the base of the tongue and throat with a low morbidity rate right here," says Dr. Cowan.

This advanced technique uses a da Vinci Surgical Robot that Dr. Cowan describes as a big spider. The equipment has three basic components. The first component, positioned next to the patient, is a mechanical robotic cart with three robotic arms. Its left arm, right arm, and camera are all small enough to fit inside the patient's mouth. The second component is a computer command center from which the physician controls the robotic arms. Finally, a computer monitor projects a magnified view of the

surgery. The equipment is reusable; each robotic arm can be used 18 to 20 times before needing to be replaced. The technology and equipment make completing the surgeries much quicker, compared to traditional methods. Each surgery can be completed in about 30 minutes, depending on complexity. And, if physicians do not know the source of the cancer, TORS can help them find it. Once found, physicians can often remove the primary source in the same surgery.

Dr. Cowan expects to treat between 60 and 80 cases of throat cancer every year within the state of New Mexico. He says, “Many centers are using this technique to expand the opportunities for minimally invasive surgery for patients with head and neck cancers. Trans-oral robotic surgery is the most effective way to remove tumors of the base of the tongue and the tonsils.”

Dr. Cowan and his team have already begun successfully using TORS to treat benign conditions in the back of the throat and mouth. They are now accepting patients right here at the UNM Cancer Center with cancer of the mouth and back of the throat.

### **About the UNM Cancer Center**

The UNM Cancer Center is the Official Cancer Center of New Mexico and the only National Cancer Institute-designated cancer center in the state. One of just 67 NCI-designated cancer centers nationwide, the UNM Cancer Center is recognized for its scientific excellence, contributions to cancer research and delivery of medical advances to patients and their families. Annual federal and private funding of over \$65 million supports the UNM Cancer Center’s research programs. The UNM Cancer Center treats more than 65 percent of the adults and virtually all of the children in New Mexico affected by cancer, from every county in the state. It is home to New Mexico’s largest team of board-certified oncology physicians and research scientists, representing every cancer specialty and hailing from prestigious institutions such as MD Anderson, Johns Hopkins and the Mayo Clinic. Through its partnership with Memorial Medical Center in Las Cruces, the UNM Cancer Center brings world-class cancer care to the southern part of the state; its collaborative clinical programs in Santa Fe and Farmington serve northern New Mexico. The UNM Cancer Center also supports several community outreach programs to make cancer screening, diagnosis and treatment available to every New Mexican. Learn more at [www.cancer.unm.edu](http://www.cancer.unm.edu).

### **UNM Cancer Center contact information**

Dorothy Hornbeck, JKPR, (505) 340-5929, [dhornbeck@jameskorenchen.com](mailto:dhornbeck@jameskorenchen.com)

Michele Sequeira, UNM Cancer Center, (505) 925-0486, [msequeira@salud.unm.edu](mailto:msequeira@salud.unm.edu)

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