

# OCCASIONAL PROTON THERAPY NEWSLETTER BY ROBERT FERRE

[www.proton-beam-therapy.com](http://www.proton-beam-therapy.com)

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## BACK IN ACTION

Being past the three-quarter century mark, I'm in one of the high-risk age groups for coronavirus. Fortunately, I live in a retirement community that takes good care of us. We have all had both Pfizer vaccine shots. You would think during a year of confinement I would have done spectacular work on my websites. That didn't happen.

## PROTON CENTERS FACE COVID-19

Cancer takes no breaks but people do. In 2020, procedures such as mammograms, colonoscopies, biopsies, PSA tests and similar nosedived by 90% early in the year then recovered somewhat but still down 40% for the year. This led to fewer diagnoses, and hence, fewer patients to treat. Some centers have created action plans in the event they treat a



patient known to have covid-19. These protocols included using side entrances, doing the treatment in off hours, and minimizing the number of staff. In all events, visitors have been restricted as lobbies have closed. Patients wait in their cars until called in for their session. Group events such as support groups are moved to Zoom or social media. Prospective and current patients have met with doctors via telephone or video (telemed). Closed lodgings and difficult travel have also created problems, especially for patients from out of the country.



The photo above is from the Seattle Cancer Care Alliance proton therapy center. When the border to and from Canada was closed, they were unable to treat numerous patients. Canada does not have a proton therapy facility.

## HOW TO READ MEDICAL STUDIES

Reading medical studies can be a daunting task. The terminology and statistical analysis comprise an almost undecipherable jargon. Do you understand probability, confidence intervals, medians and standard deviation? I spent several weeks reading books on statistics which I condensed into some eighteen pages and put on the blog located at [www.proton-beam-therapy.com](http://www.proton-beam-therapy.com).

## PERSONAL LOSS

My brother David, my only sibling, died in September, 2020, from complications of routine heart valve surgery. While he didn't have covid, his care was definitely affected by the crowded hospital and over-worked doctors. Two years my senior, he died at age 78. It is disquieting that I have the same genetic flaw in my heart valve. We are planning a memorial concert in October of 2022 in Karlskrona, Sweden, for which we have started a GoFundMe campaign. I know many have been lost this last year, but if you would consider helping out, take a look at the information available on his personal website: [www.davidandkathy.com](http://www.davidandkathy.com).

## TECHNOLOGY ADVANCES

Experiments continue in Flash technology in which one huge dose of radiation, higher than what was previously spaced over eight weeks, is given in less than one second. Done. One treatment and finished. Cancer killed. Consider what that would mean for difficult cancers such as mesothelioma, and how much it would lower the cost while still reducing side effects. Several proton centers are working on this, as well as most equipment manufacturers (it takes modifications to reach the required high power).

Another promising technique is to move the gantry in an arc around the patient while delivering the stream of protons. This fills in hard-to-reach areas such as the point at which the beam stops. Already touted for its precision, this makes proton therapy even more accurate. The future is bright.

## PROPOSED MEDICARE RULE

For two years now we have been fighting proposed changes by the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). There are two issues. One is how they will reimburse radiation therapy in general and the other is how those rules would affect proton therapy. I have previously written a whole blog giving background to this issue. This is a quick update.

The good news is that the final decision has been delayed until January 1, 2022. Called the Radiation Oncology Model Final Rule, the new regulation would group together treatments and locations (bundling), rather than the current fee-for-service plan that pays for each service separately. Supposedly that would prevent an excessive number of visits and save Medicare some \$230 million over five years.

Not all centers would have to do this. They would be chosen randomly by zip code. Medicare says that their intent is to maintain or even improve quality of care. But that doesn't seem likely. For x-ray radiologists, the new schedule would result in a cut in pay to group practices of about 6% and outpatient departments by 4.7%.

For proton therapy the cuts are even more dire, as they are included in the same pay scale, even though costs (and resulting prices) are much higher than for x-rays. That could be an economic death blow. There is an on-going effort to make exceptions for budding new technologies which are more costly, but proton therapy has not been given proper consideration.

## BENEFITS OF PROTON THERAPY

The following ten benefits of proton therapy come from the University of Kansas Health System in Kansas City. They are currently building their new proton therapy center.

1. It delivers radiation directly into the tumor to attack cancer cells while minimizing exposure in surrounding tissues and organs.
2. It reduces unwanted complications because healthy tissues and organs receive less radiation.
3. It provides targeted therapy with fewer short- and long-term side effects, depending on the patient's condition.
4. It can be used for patients with many cancer diagnoses, which may include brain, skull base and spine, head and neck, esophagus, liver, pancreas, breast, prostate, lymphoma and pediatric cancer
5. It is used to treat recurrent tumors that have previously been treated with radiation.
6. After receiving treatment, patients can leave the treatment room without any risk of radiation exposure to others.
7. It may be used in combination with other treatments, such as surgery, traditional radiation therapy and chemotherapy.
8. It can be used to treat both adults and children with cancer.
9. It is one of the safest cancer treatments available.
10. Many patients undergoing proton therapy treatments are able to continue their normal activities, such as going to work and exercising.

That's certainly a good start.

## PROTON THERAPY CENTERS

We have updated our list of proton therapy centers at [www.proton-therapy-centers.com](http://www.proton-therapy-centers.com). There are now 38 centers in operation and 13 more planned. See information about my books on proton therapy at [www.protontherapybook.com](http://www.protontherapybook.com).

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I'm feeling good and ready for action. Contact me with comments, corrections and suggestions for the newsletter or blog. I remain available to answer any questions or share with you my experience of proton therapy, the cancer treatment of the future.

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