BREAST CANCER

Resource poor but ingenuity rich

As treatment for patients with breast cancer becomes increasingly effective, the quality of life aspects have been gaining more importance. This has led, in many countries, to an increased importance being placed on the cosmetic outcomes after surgery. However, is this aspect of similar importance in countries where the resources are more limited? A study conducted in South Africa has shown that a little inventiveness can enable the effective use of available resources to allow breast conservation mastectomies to be effectively carried out.

South Africa has a largely rural and often poor population who have limited access to the scarce radiation sources. Therefore, access to standard external-beam radiotherapy for patients with cancer is restricted. A group of physicians led by Karin Baatjes have now tested an ingenious solution to this problem. They have developed a system that allows single-shot intraoperative radiotherapy to be carried out immediately after full surgical excision of a small tumour using

a simple adaptation to the available radiation sources. This means that the patient only needs access to a radiation source once for the completion of their surgery and radiotherapy.

The trial was conducted in 39 patients with resectable breast cancer and resulted in a 90% rate of 5-year overall survival. Furthermore, 74% of the patients considered the cosmetic outcome to be good or excellent. These data indicate that this is an effective treatment method when followed up with adjuvant treatment. Baatjes comments, “it is a method eminently suited for resource-restricted environments.”

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Original article Baatjes, K. J. & Apffelstaedt, J. P. 7-year follow up of intra-operative radiotherapy for early breast cancer in a developing country. *Breast* doi:10.1016/j.breast.2012.01.021

Further reading Jean-Yves Petit, J.-Y. *et al.* Opinion: Nipple-sparing mastectomy—is it worth the risk? *Nat. Rev. Clin. Oncol.* **8**, 742–747 (2011)