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MEDIA RELEASE

New Canadian study aims to cure more oral cancers

May 25, 2011

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Note:

Sarah Gustin is an East Vancouver resident
Miriam Rosin and Kitty Corbett are Port Moody residents

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Two Simon Fraser University researchers are helping to bring new hope to those with a devastating and deadly form of cancer, thanks to their participation in a new multi-site pan-Canadian surgical study of oral cancer.

SFU biomedical physiology and kinesiology professor [Miriam Rosin](#) is a principal investigator in the \$4.7 million study funded by the [Terry Fox Research Institute](#) (TFRI). It will test nationally the efficacy of a surgical tool that has already been proven to save lives in British Columbia.

During the last five years a hand-held [fluorescence visualization](#) (FV) or blue light tool developed at the BC Cancer Agency (BCCA) has been proven to prevent oral cancer recurrence by detecting previously unrecognized cancer cells. Rosin, a senior scientist and director of the BCCA's [BC Oral Cancer Prevention Program](#) oversaw the testing.

The tool, whose blue light clearly distinguishes normal from pre-cancerous or cancerous tissue, was tested in the mouths of 20 patients with early-stage oral cancer in a previous study in B.C.

In the new TFRI Canadian Optical Guided Approach for Oral Lesions Surgical (COOLS) Trial, Rosin will assess the efficacy of using the tool on 400 eligible patients across Canada over five years.

The study, involving surgeons, pathologists, research staff and scientists in nine cities, including Vancouver, nationally aims to improve the health outcomes of patients undergoing surgery for early-stage oral squamous cell cancers.

About 3,400 Canadians are diagnosed with oral cancer annually, which is deadly once it metastasizes to the neck, lymph nodes and throat. In 2010 about 1,150 people died from oral cancer.

About 30 per cent of patients who receive oral surgery using the conventional approach (normal white light during surgery) experience a recurrence of their cancer. Often surgeons can't easily see all of the cancerous tissue in the initial operation and therefore can't get it all.

"This new larger study will have an immediate impact on practice if it turns out the way we hope," says Rosin. "If the study is successful it will help to reduce nationally and eventually internationally the number of deaths from oral cancer as well as improve the quality of life for people living with the disease."

Key to the study's potential usefulness will be SFU health scientist and medical anthropologist [Kitty Corbett's](#) work to transfer knowledge gained in the study to medical practitioners in hospitals and doctors' offices.

"Knowledge translation (KT) is the science and art of applying findings learned from scientific research to improve systems of care and people's health," explains Corbett. "If the study recommends changes in surgical practice, we will be ready to promote them rapidly, appropriately and safely. In anticipation of this need when the study ends, the research group includes a knowledge translation specialist — me — with expertise in health communication and promotion."

Corbett and SFU health sciences graduate student Sarah Gustin will partner with surgeons at all the study sites to understand their work contexts, typical workflow, and challenges to adopting the new FV tool.

Corbett and Gustin will collaborate with surgeons and other scientists in packaging instructional material and disseminating it to medical practitioners.

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