Proton Therapy - Letter to Insurers

Dear Medical Insurer,

Patient seeking to confirm cover for proton therapy

Your patient has investigated Proton Therapy on our website MHLclinics.com and is now seeking your assistance regarding insurance coverage for this treatment. Proton therapy is an advanced form of radiation therapy and our website explains the benefits over radiotherapy and radiosurgery, both of which are X-ray based.

Proton therapy is not new, but until recently its use was confined to low power systems, principally for eye treatments. Modern proton therapy is more powerful and more precise. Broadly, it can be applied wherever radiotherapy is feasible and in many cases where radiotherapy cannot be applied or is insufficient.

Recent advances in scanning technologies have provided more accurate imaging of tumours and 'proton scanning' radiation techniques enable proton therapy to be delivered precisely on target. In practice, the limitation in accuracy is now that of the diagnostic scanning, rather than placement of the proton beams.

Proton therapy offers the gentlest form of treatment for many forms of cancer today and the principal advantages are:

1) Three-dimensional targeting of tumours. En route to target through the body, proton beams deliver much less radiation to healthy tissue than X-ray beams. They deposit a high dose in the target and then almost nothing beyond. This 'Bragg Peak' of radiation can be adjusted finely, to deposit high dosage radiation to all parts of an irregularly shaped tumour. The result is far less radiation exposure to sensitive tissue around and beyond the tumour than X-ray systems are capable of.

2) Proton therapy is suitable for the very young, who are particularly susceptible to radiation damage. Initially treatment was prioritised for children but capacity has now increased and it is available to all. Older patients also benefit greatly, as they are better able to tolerate proton therapy than the X-ray treatment of conventional radiotherapy.

3) Side effects are reduced and more localised and there is less danger of radiation-induced cancers arising at a later stage.

4) Because of the higher concentration of radiation within the target zone, it is possible to employ higher power to treat stubborn tumours which resist conventional radiotherapy treatments.

For example when treating head and neck tumours, proton therapy can substantially reduce damage to eyes, optic nerves, salivary glands and other nearby tissue and organs. Proton therapy reduces the likelihood of side effects such as blindness, hearing deterioration and dry mouth, whilst secondary malignancies are also less likely.

Cost of treatment

Proton therapy requires dedicated centres, costing US$300m or more to build, so treatment is not cheap. However the reduction in side effects and avoidance of complex surgery and on-going support in some cases must be considered alongside this. Many more centres are under construction or planned around the world, because proton therapy can offer better therapy options or, in many cases, the only therapy option.

Most proton centres are currently in the USA or Japan, but we also offer the Rinecker Proton Therapy Centre in Munich, Germany, which is convenient and cost-effective for many patients. With five treatment rooms and on-site accommodation, single or shared, this centre was built with international patients in mind.

Whilst medical treatments in the USA are generally known to be expensive compared to other countries, the proton centres that we work with there strive to provide affordable treatments for international patients.

Accordingly we understand that they are at the lower end of charging scales in the USA, whilst still maintaining high standards of medical and personal care.

We are currently in discussions with Japanese proton centres, which also offer even more powerful ion-beam therapy.

Funding of treatment

In principle E112 funding for proton therapy is available for European Union citizens from their governments, but in practice financial resources may result in long delays in approving an application. Some European governments also fund treatments in the USA, but again cases are likely to be quite restricted.

Some private health insurers do cover proton therapy but knowledge and understanding of proton therapy is still limited in some quarters. Most policies were written before proton therapy was a realistic option for more than a few special cases so applications should be considered on their merits, bering in mind the benefits over other forms of treatment.

Through MHL's service, proton therapy is now available to patients everywhere and at a choice of centres. Some of your members will be seeking proton therapy because they have no other practical option, whilst others will want to reduce their risk of damaging and distressing side effects from radiotherapy or risks of surgery.

Centres such as these cannot be built in every town or indeed in every country – that is not practical and would not be cost-effective. Therefore for the foreseeable future, most patients will have to travel to another country, but this should not be a bar to patients receiving the treatment they need.

Yours sincerely,

Phillip Stacey Managing Director,

Medilux Healthcare Ltd.

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