

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

NEW PROCEDURE MEETS NEEDS OF AGING, COMPLEX HEART PATIENTS

TORONTO, January 26, 2010– A new program at Sunnybrook’s Schulich Heart Centre is improving access to a potentially lifesaving heart procedure for elderly or frail patients not well enough to undergo traditional aortic valve replacement surgery.

Narrowing of the aortic valve, or “stenosis”, is a fairly common condition in today’s aging population. It occurs when the aortic valve, which keeps oxygen-rich blood flowing from our heart into the largest artery in our body, becomes partially blocked, impairing flow of blood to the rest of the body. If left untreated, stenosis can cause the heart muscle to thicken as it works harder to pump blood through the body - potentially leading to heart failure.

“Surgical replacement of the diseased valve with an artificial one is considered the best treatment for aortic valve stenosis,” says Dr. Sam Radhakrishnan, Interventional Cardiologist and Physician-Lead of the Transcatheter Aortic Valve Implantation (TAVI) program at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre. “Unfortunately, many of the patients we see with this condition have significant co-existing medical issues that render them unable to withstand the physical trauma of open-heart surgery. In the past, we have had to treat these patients with drugs alone, which is proven to be less effective than with valve replacement.”

With the introduction of the TAVI initiative at Sunnybrook, patients who are considered too high risk for conventional open-heart surgery to replace or repair the aortic valve may be candidates for a substantially less invasive procedure. In this procedure, a team of doctors including an Interventional Cardiologist, Cardiac Surgeon and Vascular Surgeon are able to implant a new valve percutaneously (without opening the chest).

During a TAVI procedure, the team of doctors inserts a catheter (tube) into an artery in the groin through which they are able to pass further catheters to the diseased heart valve. The doctors are able to see the position of the valve on a screen displaying X-ray images of the inside of the patient’s chest. This technique greatly minimizes the operative risks and patient trauma associated with opening up the chest and stopping the heart. The whole procedure takes an hour and a half, as opposed to twice as long for conventional open-heart surgery, and may be carried out under general anaesthesia or local anaesthesia with, or without sedation.

Minimally invasive valvular interventions offer many benefits to patients including reduced pain and less need for postoperative pain medication, smaller scars, a shorter stay in the hospital and a faster recovery. People who undergo percutaneous valve interventions can often return home after only a few days and resume many normal activities within a couple of weeks rather than a couple of months.

“This program will do wonders to improve the health of some of the most critically ill heart patients in Ontario,” says Dr. Brian Gilbert, Chief of the Schulich Heart Centre. “About half of all patients with stenosis do not get treated because they are considered too old or too frail for traditional surgery. This program makes it possible for us to offer the very best cardiovascular care for our patients so they can return to the best possible quality of life sooner.”

To continue providing this life-saving procedure to patients, Sunnybrook Foundation is raising funds to purchase the heart valves used in this procedure. Anyone interested in making a donation can go to www.sunnybrook.ca.

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