GOOD NEWS FOR MEN

By Peter Whiteford

Your doctor can now diagnose your risk of prostate cancer with greater accuracy. It takes a simple new blood test called the phi.

Phi, short for Prostate Health Index, is a powerful combination of three tests in one. The phi test measures total PSA, free PSA and pro2PSA, a novel form of PSA that is highly elevated in prostate cancer tissue and is associated with more aggressive cancer. All of the measures are built into a mathematical formula that calculates an indexed phi score. Phi refines the risk of your original PSA test higher or lower, thereby giving you and your doctor additional information to better guide your plan of treatment.

Phi is particularly useful in men with PSA in the “gray zone” of 2-10, for whom evaluating cancer risk can be especially difficult, and is FDA approved for men with a PSA in the 4-10 range. Men with PSA greater than 4 have traditionally been referred for biopsy; however, 25% of prostate cancer patients have PSA below this cut-off, while 75% of those with PSA greater than 4 are actually cancer-free. (National Canter Institute) The phi score is three times more specific than the traditional PSA test in detecting prostate cancer; that means that doctors can perform 30% fewer biopsies without significantly decreasing their ability to diagnose important cancers.

In 2012, due to the high percentage of false diagnoses and unnecessary biopsies, the United States Preventive Services Task Force’s (USPSTF) issued a recommendation against the use of the PSA blood test to screen healthy men for prostate cancer.
Since the USPSTF recommendation, PSA screening and biopsies have declined significantly across the nation. Dr. Kevin Slawin, founder and director of the Vanguard Urologic Institute at Memorial Hermann and director of Urology at Memorial Hermann-Texas Medical Center, is hopeful that the FDA approval of the phi will rebalance the scales in favor of early screening. He commented:

“There’s been a lot of controversy about whether to get a PSA blood test or not. We have new technologies like the phi test that allow us to consider an abnormal test and decide who to be more aggressive with and who to leave alone. It means not everybody is necessarily on the pathway to more testing and invasive procedures. The USPSTF acknowledged that PSA screening saves lives, but they didn’t feel it was worth the negative consequences for healthy men, including unnecessary biopsies, over diagnosis and overtreatment associated with the PSA test. However, why can’t we use these advanced technologies, like phi, to save lives and avoid unnecessary procedures and treatments? If we simply stick our heads in the sand, then in the next 10 years, men are going to present with high grade metastatic prostate cancer who may have had curable cancer but were never tested until it was too late.”

Currently, the phi test is only available at the Vanguard Urologic Institute at Memorial Hermann in Houston and at Northwestern University in Chicago. Nationwide access is expected by this summer.

Availability of the test represents the culmination of years of hard work by leading researchers from around the world on the biology of prostate cancer and the PSA molecule. FDA approval of the phi test occurred in 2012, more than ten years after the original discovery of the key component, pro2PSA. The test became available in the Vanguard clinic in February 2014.

For Slawin, one of the key researchers who developed the phi test, it was a milestone. “Although I had some gratification knowing that the test was being used in a widespread way in many countries in Europe, it’s very exciting to offer the test in our own practice. But most importantly, after 10 years of continued focus on the problem, it feels very good to have made a contribution that has the potential to improve the lives of countless men.”

Seemingly innocuous decisions like “screen or no screen” can actually have great impact. It’s best to get in front of future decisions by arming yourself with the most pioneering information available today, such as the phi. It can be a valuable new tool for successfully managing your prostate health.