SAVED SERIES:

GRATEFUL PATIENT THANKS THORACIC SURGEONS

Donations bringing new lung imaging technology to Surrey Memorial Hospital

It's been exactly two years since Marten Van Huizen had lung cancer surgery at Surrey Memorial Hospital.

Since then, the Langley resident has regained his health, returned to work and turned his energies to raising money for the hospital's thoracic surgery program.

Thanks to his fundraising efforts for Surrey Hospital & Outpatient Centre Foundation, the program will soon become the first in B.C. to purchase a piece of new technology that enables specialists to more efficiently diagnose, localize and treat cancers located deep inside the lungs.

Having beaten the odds himself, Van Huizen believes that it's important to support new techniques and technology as they not only help patients recover more quickly and regain their quality of life, but also lower the costs to the health care system.

Above all, he wanted to help the surgeons who provided him with excellent care.

"The whole thoracic team in Surrey is extremely skilled. We have a top-drawer team here. If they are not in the top five in North America, I would be surprised," he says. "We have such a high expectation of the health care system, we forget that there are people behind it doing extraordinary things."

His thoracic surgeon, Dr. Ahmad Ashrafi, calls his patient a remarkable man. Before meeting Ashrafi, Van Huizen had already endured major surgeries to remove colorectal cancer. Unfortunately, the disease had spread, and the cancer lesions found in his lungs were not responding to chemotherapy, making surgery the best option.

As a project manager with experience in health care, Van Huizen did his own research on the best place to have his surgery. A friend who had been treated for esophageal cancer at Surrey Memorial assured him that he would be in very good hands with the hospital's thoracic team. He also contacted one of the top U.S. hospitals, discovering that the care in B.C. was equally good.

Starting in December 2014, Van Huizen had two lung surgeries about six weeks apart. In both, Ashrafi removed sections of the lungs using minimally invasive surgery (MIS) techniques, sometimes called Video Assisted Thoracoscopic Surgery (VATS). This enables the surgeon to operate through small 'key-hole' incisions, using a tiny video camera and slim, long-handled instruments.

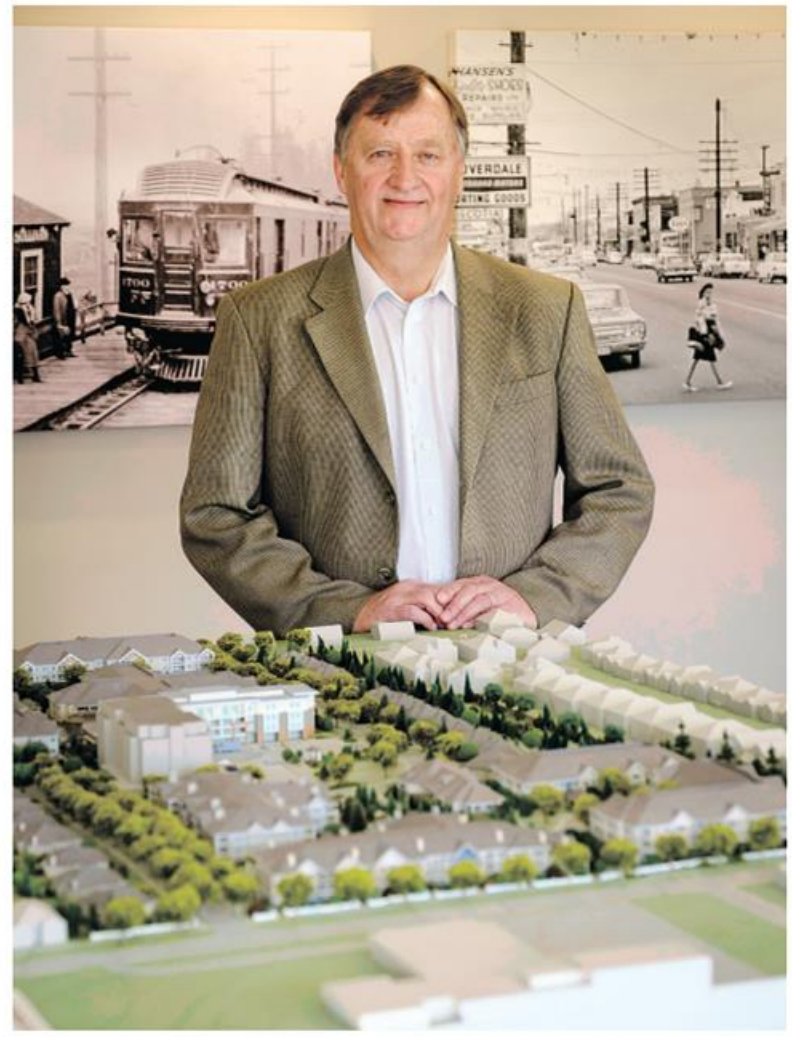
Over the past 10 years, the use of MIS techniques for lung and other thoracic surgeries has evolved rapidly. Ashrafi explains that the four-surgeon thoracic team now performs more than 90 per cent of surgeries using MIS techniques, compared to major centres in the U.S., where the rate is only about 40 per cent.

"At Surrey, you can almost count on one hand the number of times that we do not do an operation by MIS," notes Ashrafi. "We are a fairly exclusive centre for performing almost all of our surgeries by MIS."

Having received conventional open surgery for his original cancer procedures, Van Huizen was surprised at how quickly he recovered. After the second lung operation, he spent only two days in hospital, and was even able to walk to the post office on the day he was discharged.

However, Ashrafi points out that the benefits of performing lung cancer surgeries using this technique go beyond the accelerated return to normal function. For patients like Van Huizen who need surgery on both lungs, the reduced recovery period means that the procedures can be done closer together, leaving less time for the cancers on the second side to grow and potentially become inoperable.

In addition, recent research data shows that there are other important benefits of MIS, especially for patients with cancer. Traditional open-chest lung surgery involves cutting the chest wall and disrupting the large muscles within, Ashrafi explains. This creates an inflammatory response, which can suppress the patient's immune system and make it less effective in fighting cancer.



Marten Van Huizen is back at work following lifesaving surgery. *SUPPLIED*

"Data is now showing that people who undergo MIS surgery are less likely to have cancer recurrence," he says.

In the next few months, Surrey Memorial will take delivery of the new SuperDimension Navigation System made possible by Van Huizen's fundraising efforts. This will enable the thoracic surgery team to continue the evolution towards a more efficient approach to surgery as well as using even smaller incisions for lung procedures.

This advanced imaging tool is powered by GPS-like technology to find lesions deep in the lungs. Once located, they can be biopsied or removed. Lesions or tumours found using this device can also be "marked" to enable radiation oncologists to map out radiation treatment.