

USA TODAY Questions ^{131}I Patient Release Safety

Nuclear medicine practitioners across the United States found themselves answering numerous questions from concerned patients and families after a November 19 article in *USA TODAY* with a headline that asked, “It Kills Thyroid Cancer, But Is Radiation Safe?” The article focused on guidelines for patient release after ^{131}I treatment and profiled the concerns of several patients who chose to electively isolate themselves from families and friends after radioisotope treatment. One patient, who had isolated herself from other human contact for 2 weeks after treatment, told *USA TODAY*, “How can you have any peace of mind when you know you’re potentially putting your family at risk? I’d rather live in a box under a bridge than come home to my small children.”

The article, which attempted to balance reporting on the benefits and risks of radiation, also contained the results of a recent survey performed in collaboration with the Thyroid Cancer Survivors Association. The survey, which focused on “how patients react to the risks and uncertainties of ^{131}I therapy,” drew 914 responses. Results indicated that more than half of patients treated with ^{131}I were released rather than kept as inpatients. More than 85% of outpatients “worried about exposing their family members to radiation.” Eighty-six percent of outpatients went directly home after treatment, with 2% traveling by public transportation. About 4% checked into a hotel or other accommodations, which *USA TODAY* cited as “potentially posing a risk to guests or cleaning staff.” Nine of 10 respondents indicated they were warned of radiation risks, but many respondents

reported being given confusing or conflicting information. The article described the experiences of several patients who had fears about being “radioactive” and confusion over appropriate guidelines for interaction with family members.

The newspaper traced the confusion to the 1997 change in Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) guidelines that allowed ^{131}I treatment on an outpatient basis and also cited disagreement in the medical community over patient release guidelines. In a separate article, with the title “Radioactivity May Be Danger,” *USA TODAY* profiled the efforts of Peter Crane, a former NRC lawyer and thyroid cancer survivor, to persuade the agency to reverse its decision. “Its goal was to increase patients’ choice, but its practical effect was to deprive patients of hospital care,” said Crane.

In a response letter published in *USA TODAY* on November 28, SNM President Alexander J. McEwan, MD, emphasized that the current guidelines are strict and that “radioactive iodine therapy is safe, simple, effective, and nearly always curative.” He pointed out that the guidelines for patient release were implemented after years of research by top nuclear medicine experts and NRC staff and that these rules exist to ensure that radiation risks for patients’ family members and others are within safe limits. When patients follow the appropriate posttherapy instructions, “virtually no radiation risk” is associated with ^{131}I treatment for thyroid cancer, he wrote. McEwan concluded with the admonition that “Any attempts to change the current rules will adversely affect patient care and speed of recovery from this curable cancer.” ✨