Felix Cheung, MD, is one of a very small number of orthopedic oncologists in the United States – and the only one within a 120 mile radius of Huntington.

Most people facing treatment for bone cancer see many different doctors as they progress from testing to diagnosis to surgery and other treatments like chemotherapy and radiation. But here in the Tri-State region, patients have a “one-stop shop” for all bone cancer care – Felix Cheung, MD, the only orthopedic oncologist within a 120 mile radius of Huntington.

An orthopedic oncologist is a surgeon who specializes in the diagnosis and treatment of primary bone cancers, or cancers that begin in a person’s bones. They can also treat people with cancers of a different origin that have spread to the bone. And some, including Dr. Cheung, also diagnose and treat benign and malignant tumors of the soft tissue, such as muscle and fat.

Primary bone cancer only accounts for less than 0.2 percent of all cancers – or the equivalent of about 2,000 cases in the United States each year. And orthopedic
oncologists are just as rare. There are only about 120 of them in the country.

“There are very few orthopedic oncologists out there because the training is very rigorous and there just aren’t that many primary bone cancer cases in the United States,” Dr. Cheung said. “To treat these patients appropriately requires very specialized care.”

That specialized care often involves chemotherapy, surgery to remove the cancer, reconstructive surgery and then more chemotherapy.

“A lot of times, we have to remove a portion of the bone or the entire bone to get our margins to be negative,” Dr. Cheung said. “That often leaves the patient with a huge deficit, especially if we’ve had to remove their femur or humerus. In the past, we’d have to amputate in order to get a negative margin, but with modern technology, we’ve been able to implant total femurs and total humeruses, allowing us to salvage limbs and preserve function in many cases.”

Much progress has been made in the field of orthopedic oncology, according to Dr. Cheung. He points to improvements in chemotherapy and the growing longevity of implants, which are now lasting 15 to 20 years, as examples of that progress.

“Additionally, for people who receive the appropriate treatment for most primary bone cancers, the five-year survivorship is now over 70 percent,” Dr. Cheung said. “For cancers of the soft tissue, the five-year survivorship is somewhere between 60 to 70 percent, depending on the size of the tumor.”

But those survivorship statistics are only for patients who receive the appropriate treatment – the kind of treatment you’ll only find at a comprehensive cancer center, from an orthopedic oncologist.  

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