



American Society for Therapeutic Radiology and Oncology

by David Hussey, M.D.

WHO WE ARE

The American Society for Therapeutic Radiology and Oncology (ASTRO) was founded in 1958 to promote the practice of radiation oncology. With a membership of 6,200, ASTRO's mission is to advance the practice of radiation oncology by disseminating the results of scientific research, promoting excellence in patient care, providing opportunities for the educational and professional development of its members, and representing radiation oncology.

TOP PRIORITIES IN 2001

- Continue to educate ASTRO members on current and evolving state-of-the-art techniques and technology in radiation therapy
- Improve the quality of patient care by applying new technologies
- Seek appropriate reimbursement

Education is one of ASTRO's top priorities in 2001, not only because it has been the organization's main mission in the past, but also because radiation therapy is undergoing dramatic changes. The society is responsible for preparing its members for the future with the overall aim of improving the quality of patient care.

David Hussey, M.D., is chairman of the board of the American Society for Therapeutic Radiology and Oncology, headquartered in Fairfax, Va. He is also professor of radiation oncology at the University of Texas at San Antonio College of Medicine.

The rapid changes in techniques and technology make ASTRO's role even more significant. For example, in the last few years there has been an increase in the use of 3-D conformal radiation therapy (3-D CRT) and intensity modulated radiation therapy (IMRT). These techniques provide an opportunity for radiation oncologists to deliver treatment more precisely, minimizing the volume of normal tissues irradiated and minimizing the risk of complications. These techniques also allow physicians to deliver higher doses of radiation, which should increase the probability of local control. In the last two years, ASTRO has offered six one-day 3-D CRT workshops for teams of physicians, radiation therapists, physicists, and others in the radiation oncology department. The workshops provide hands-on experience in treatment planning and delivery and examine how to ensure quality 3-D CRT.

ASTRO has also educated its members, payers, government officials, and physician colleagues about vascular brachytherapy. This new technique, which offers an expanded role for the radiation oncologist, uses radiation to treat arterial restenosis and could benefit more than 100,000 patients a year. ASTRO is providing opportunities for its members to learn how to do this procedure, and is working with government officials and physician colleagues to ensure patient safety as well as adequate reimbursement.

In addition, ASTRO has successfully worked to ensure that payers will reimburse for IMRT treatments. Recently, the Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA) created two new interim billing codes (G0174 and G0178) that cover the work effort and equipment costs for the planning and delivery of IMRT. These temporary codes may

be billed in the hospital outpatient setting only. Regarding freestanding clinics, the CPT Editorial Panel recently approved two new CPT codes for IMRT, which should be implemented as part of the Medicare physician fee schedule in January 2002. For IMRT, these will be permanent CPT codes.

With the rapid changes in technology, can physicians and other members of the treatment team keep up, and how can the public be assured that they stay current? These questions are the driving force of the maintenance of certification program. A move is underway that will require physicians to meet certain requirements in order to maintain their certification. In January 2001, the ASTRO board participated in a retreat to discuss ASTRO's current and future educational efforts, and maintenance of certification was discussed at length. The board agreed that ASTRO should be a guiding force on this issue.

New techniques in radiation therapy require the skills of trained personnel; however, a shortage of such personnel in radiation therapy is imminent. ASTRO is developing methods to encourage recruitment and education of "new" physicians and other members of the treatment team. Support for training of radiation oncologists is a critical issue for the specialty. With the recent financial cutbacks, teaching hospitals have suffered, and resident training is in jeopardy. In addition, a crucial shortage of radiation therapists, dosimetrists, and physicists is being reported. ASTRO has offered matching grants to radiation therapy programs to assist them in recruitment efforts, and the society is reviewing additional methods for encouraging recruitment of these critical health care workers. ☐