

Doctors look for tailored prostate cancer treatment

Genes can show best approach

By Lauran Neergaard
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WASHINGTON — Prostate cancer has been left behind in the race for personalized medicine, but that may be changing: Doctors are starting to attempt gene-guided treatment for men with advanced disease.

It's an approach already offered in treating breast and certain other cancers. The new prostate work is a small step at catching up. And it targets the men in worst need — those whose prostate cancer has spread to the bones or other parts of the body, who are no longer helped by hormone treatment to slow its march.

These are the men who ultimately die of prostate cancer, some 28,000 a year.

"Prostate cancer has learned some tricks," said Dr. Phillip Febbo of Duke University Medical Center, who is unraveling how to decode those tricks to better direct therapy — by looking directly at the tumor's genetic signature.

The research is very preliminary, but if a gene-guided method ultimately works it could ease what the American Cancer Society's Dr. Durado Brooks calls today's "shotgun approach" to advanced prostate cancer. Patients slog their way through a handful of medications in no particular order, changing course only after the cancer quits responding.

Starting next month, Duke will recruit men for a

study that will help determine their treatment.

Tumors carry a pattern of gene and protein activity that signals whether a cancer is more or less aggressive and whether it is susceptible to various treatments. Those signatures have led to breast cancer tests that predict which tumors are more likely to return, helping patients decide whether to try or skip chemotherapy, for example.

But finding genetic signatures in prostate tumors has been a struggle. Men tend to get prostate biopsies early on, before the cancer has spread. Very few get one after their cancer worsens, when the tumor has evolved, leaving few advanced tumor samples for scientists to examine which genetic activity is most crucial, Febbo explained.