HONOLULU – The Queen’s Medical Center (Queen’s) is the first and only hospital in Hawaii to offer FibroScan, a new FDA-approved technology that could help to reduce significantly the need for painful and costly biopsies for liver disease patients.

FibroScan is a painless, non-invasive diagnostic tool that uses vibration to measure the elasticity or stiffness of a patient’s liver: a key factor in determining the condition and extent of a patient’s liver damage.

“For our patients with Hepatitis C or other liver conditions, we can now measure the progress of their treatments without having them undergo repeated biopsies,” said Naoky Tsai, M.D., Medical Director of the Queen’s Liver Center and Liver Transplant Program.

Traditionally, patients would do a liver biopsy, where a 6-inch needle was inserted into the liver to cut and extract a portion of it for testing under a microscope. The procedure could take several hours to complete, followed by several days waiting for lab results. It costs thousands of dollars.

Now, patients can be tested with a probe that looks and feels much like what a pregnant woman experiences during an ultrasound. The FibroScan device measures how long it takes for a vibration to travel through the liver. Vibrations travel faster through diseased livers than healthy ones. The process takes only 10 minutes and the costs are dramatically lower. There is also no recovery time, since it is a non-invasive procedure.

The American Liver Foundation estimates that 1 in 10 Americans has liver disease. Liver disease is the fourth leading cause of death among adults 45-54. Because Hepatitis C is so prevalent in baby boomers, last year, the Centers for Disease Control issued new recommendations that every baby boomer be tested.

“FibroScan is now part of our arsenal in the fight against liver disease, along with
exciting new medications and treatment options,” said Dr. Tsai. “The outlook for our patients has never been brighter.”

By correctly identifying a liver’s stiffness, doctors can better determine appropriate treatment and medication. The non-invasive and far more affordable nature of the FibroScan tests could also help to bring in patients who have been postponing the procedure for fear of the cost and painful nature of the old tests.

“Our patients have responded positively to this new testing method,” said Dr. Tsai. “They don’t have to worry about getting another costly, painful biopsy; and we don’t want them to worry. We just want our patients to focus on one thing – getting better.”

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