

Probing livers without needles

The number of liver biopsies required in the UK could be as much as halved if a new machine which can test for liver disease externally were widely adopted, according to Rajiv Jalan, senior lecturer in Hepatology at the University College Hospital in London and consultant at The London Clinic where the Fibroscan machine has recently started to be used.

The machine is similar in principle to an ultrasound machine. It sends ultrasonic waves from a person's skin on to their liver so a trained doctor can tell how stiff the organ's surface is.

"The liver is normally soft, or compliant, when healthy and when disease is present it can become inflamed and it loses that elasticity," explains Jalan.

"The fibroscan is fantastic for spotting this stiffness and although it can't actually tell you what is

wrong with the liver, it does let you know if a biopsy is required."

This is important because, in Jalan's two months experience of offering the scans at The London Clinic, he estimates that biopsies could be reduced by a third or a half.

"There is nothing wrong with a biopsy, it's still a doctor's best tool for finding out what is wrong with a patient's liver," he says.

"Like any biopsy, though, there is a risk of bleeding as the liver is

full of blood vessels and it isn't something that patients would choose to have done and so if you can tell whether a biopsy is absolutely necessary, then it has to be a good thing."

Jalan believes that the Fibroscan breakthrough will be very useful in helping doctors deal with a rise in liver disease caused mainly, it is believed, by obesity and excessive drinking. If patients present with early symptoms the machine could show some stiffness but not enough to warrant a biopsy and then a patient can be told they are running a very real risk of liver disease and be given advice to cut their chances of requiring further treatment. A future session on the Fibroscan could tell if their liver's health has improved and, if it has deteriorated and the doctor deems it necessary, a biopsy can then be performed.

