Cancer Care at AMH Taking Giant Leap Ahead of the Rest

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Stereotactic Radiosurgery Available at Refurbished Center Reopening in May

The Cancer Care Center at Alton Memorial Hospital will be reopening in May after a $4 million technology upgrade and building renovation.

AMH will be breaking the boundaries of cancer care and radiation oncology. A new TrueBeam linear accelerator from Varian Medical Systems and a Phillips Brilliance CT Big Bore simulator will be installed along with other renovations to the entire building.

“We anticipate the building reopening in May,” says Stacey Ballard, manager of Imaging and Oncology Services at AMH. “One of the best things to come out of the renovation is our new equipment that will allow us to treat patients with the most advanced radiation treatments available today.”

“Stereotactic radiosurgery, more specifically stereotactic body radiotherapy (SBRT), is a newer form of radiation therapy treatment that will be offered at Alton Memorial Hospital,” said Dr. Joel Simmons, medical director of Radiation Oncology at the Cancer Care Center. “This is unlike surgery in the sense that it is non-invasive and doesn’t come with the potential acute surgical complications, such as blood loss, infection or a lengthy inpatient hospital stay.

“By using proper immobilization techniques, image guidance and multiple radiation beams, we are able to pinpoint higher doses of radiation therapy to the tumor and get more accurate results than ever before. By increasing the dose per treatment we are able to significantly decrease the number of treatments needed. A traditional lung treatment may typically take seven weeks of daily treatment, whereas with SBRT we can accomplish it in as few as three treatments.”

Dr. Simmons does stress that SBRT is only for a certain subset of cancers and not everyone is eligible for the treatment.

“SBRT is already the standard of care for certain cancers such as inoperable non-small cell lung cancer and is showing promise in other areas as we conduct clinical trials,” he said. “For us to have this technology available for the Alton community is an amazing investment in the community and benefit to the patients. Up until now, patients in this area would have to travel to the Siteman Cancer Center in St. Louis to receive this treatment. Now we can deliver it close to home.”

Dr. Simmons compared the TrueBeam to other machines that deliver stereotactic treatments.

“Our TrueBeam machine will be able to deliver comparable treatments to the Gamma Knife and Cyber Knife,” he said. “Those machines are stereotactic specific, whereas TrueBeam offers more versatility with the ability for traditional longer treatments as well as the short-course stereotactic treatments”.

The TrueBeam will also come with the ability to deliver arc therapy. This allows for shortened treatment times.

“Traditional treatments can be uncomfortable for patients,” Dr. Simmons said. “You’re lying on a cold, hard table -- sometimes for 20 or 30 minutes at a time. The machine and the table rotate to different positions to accomplish the various treatment angles. With arc therapy, instead of repositioning the machine and table, we can accomplish the entire treatment in one or two swooping arcs. This can result in a 30-minute treatment being delivered in 3 minutes.”

The Cancer Care Center, now known as Medical Office Building C on the AMH campus, closed in mid-February to begin the renovation.

“Patient treatment is continuing uninterrupted in the Radiation Oncology department at Christian Hospital,” Ballard said. “Dr. Simmons and his staff will be doing all consults and delivering care there in the interim. Patients will be provided with gas cards to offset transportation costs and dedicated parking spots will be provided near the building for patient convenience. It’s as seamless a transition as possible, and the patient care remains excellent as always.”

Alton Memorial Hospital has forged a partnership with Washington University which allows for all of the planning of the radiation treatments to be performed by Washington University staff. This means that the same expertise in developing the treatment plans and maintaining quality assurance of the treatments (e.g. safety checks) are the same standards for Washington University / Siteman Cancer Center.

“The relationship with Washington University is unique in the sense that we are able to deliver their quality of care in the local Alton community without having our patients make the drive to Siteman,” Dr. Simmons said.

The $4 million investment will enable AMH physicians and staff to deliver care utilizing the same technology and equipment used at the Siteman Cancer Center in St. Louis, the Mayo Clinic, MD Anderson Cancer Center and Johns Hopkins Hospital. When the Cancer Care Center reopens, AMH will be the only cancer center treating patients with this technology in Illinois south of Springfield.

Also on the horizon will be the availability for AMH patients to participate in randomized clinical trials now offered at Siteman Cancer Center.

“Access to clinical trials, the same trials offered at premier cancer centers across the country, will be the ultimate goal for our patients in Alton,” Dr. Simmons said. “We hope to have this in place shortly after we reopen.”

Dr. Joel Simmons
Stacey Ballard

The Philips Brilliance CT Big Bore simulator that will be one of the new pieces in the AMH Cancer Care Center along with the TrueBeam linear accelerator (on the cover) when the center reopens in May.