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Cancer Center goes high-tech to battle disease

By COLBY FRAZIER — Sept. 16, 2009



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Dr. Thomas Walker of the Cancer Center of Santa Barbara yesterday highlights the features of the Novalis Tx image-guided radio-surgery platform, the newest addition to the Cancer Center of Santa Barbara. Precisely delivering 21 million volts of energy, it is among the world's most powerful tools in the fight to eliminate cancerous tumors.

Tucked in the bowels of the Cancer Center of Santa Barbara is a machine that resembles a high-tech gizmo from a “Star Wars” movie.

But instead of shooting green and red bullets, this machine's massive arms rotate into place around a cancer patient, zapping cancerous tumors to smithereens.

It's futuristic, but it's real, and Cancer Center officials say the machine, a Novalis Tx image-guided radiosurgery platform — one of four in the state — will revolutionize the center's ability to quickly and efficiently battle serious forms of cancer.

“This is a large technological leap for us,” said Rick Scott, president of the Cancer Center, adding that he believes the new platform will help cement the Cancer Center as a top-notch treatment facility.

Doctors say the new platform can efficiently attack tumors in sensitive areas like the spinal cord and brain, and precisely deliver strong doses of radiation.



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While the 14-year-old system that the new platform replaced served some of these functions, officials say it did so less efficiently.

One of the main differences between the new, souped-up platform and the older system is the ability to take CT scans and X-rays on the same table used for treatment, isolate the patient, and accurately beat back the cancer, all while minimizing harm to the patient.

According to Dr. Thomas Weisenburger, accuracy is the key. He said the new machine, while delivering a stronger radiation dose than similar products, does its job so precisely that it causes little damage to healthy tissues surrounding the cancer.

“This gives us quicker treatment with a little bit more precision,” he said during a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the new device yesterday at the Cancer Center, adding that the new machine is something he and his colleagues have “dreamed about.”

The machine’s rotating arm, known as a linear accelerator, makes it possible to zap tumors from various angles. At 21 million volts, it’s far stronger than the 6 million volt system it replaced, and according to a fact sheet, delivers a higher dose of radiation than any other machine, providing treatment for tumors once thought to be untreatable.

When the new machine goes live at the end of this month, Weisenburger said 25 to 35 patients per day could find themselves in the platform’s grasp, eyeing ceiling tiles painted with a blue sky and bright, green trees.

Scott said some patients with tumors near the spinal chord, which are difficult to treat with less accurate machines, have been forced to travel to Stanford, UC San Diego and UCLA — the other three locations with the platform — for treatment.

Now, he believes the Cancer Center will itself be a magnet for patients seeking the treatment from as far away as Bakersfield.

The machine can also treat non-oncology related ailments, such as damaged blood vessel in the brain, which Weisenburger said the system can fix without surgery. “We’re just so excited,” he said. “It’s really the best piece of equipment that a cancer center could want.”