

Cancer treatment center construction finished

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Construction of the new \$5.1 million Mary Bird Perkins Radiation Treatment Center has been completed and center officials hope to occupy the complex by mid-August.

The facility, which was unveiled Friday by the board of the Cancer, Radiation and Research Foundation and members of the center staff, will permit the center to double the number of patients it serves and to offer treatment unavailable at the existing treatment center.

"We are going to have more equipment. It's not very different from what we have, but it will be more powerful and more flexible," said Dr. Sheldon Johnson, a radiation oncologist for the center. "It will enable us to do new things and provide new treatment."

The most important addition to the facility's equipment is a 20-million volt linear accelerator that electrically produces radiation. Its radiation can be directed to cancerous tissue while causing less damage to healthy tissue than caused by traditional treatment

machines that use radioactive cobalt to produce radiation.

"It's almost incredible for a town this size to have a facility like this," said William Kubricht Jr., chief radiation physicist. "If you tried to do this in any other town in the region, it wouldn't work. They tried it in New Orleans and it failed."

The Baton Rouge center has been a success for 14 years because of extensive community support and donations, he said.

When first established, the center was an innovative concept in medicine. It was based on the idea of having a central location to treat cancer patients rather than having expensive equipment stationed at each hospital. In doing so, the central facility could afford more equipment and acquire innovative and expensive treatment machines more readily than a single hospital.

The idea for the treatment center emerged in the late 1960s and the Cancer, Radiation and Research Foundation was established by local cancer organizations, physicians, and community charitable groups to build a

center to serve the needs of cancer patients in Baton Rouge and surrounding parishes. In 1971 the foundation opened the Mary Bird Perkins Radiation Treatment Center on the grounds of Woman's Hospital.

"In 1970 the most sophisticated machine in this town for treating cancer was a 250,000 volt Orthovoltage machine, and they had been around since the 1930s," Kubricht said. "Now we're getting ready to use the biggest linear accelerator between Dallas-Ft. Worth or perhaps Houston and Atlanta."

The new treatment center, located on land leased from Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center, looks little like the advanced medical institution one would expect. Gone are white walls and intrusive florescent lighting. Gone are noisy tiled floors and stern

institutional rooms.

Instead, patients and visitors will find walls, floors, and furnishings painted or covered with attractive muted colors. The waiting room for patients and families appears more like one of a first-class hotel than a medical center.

"We attempted to do the interior design and furniture so it doesn't look like an institutional setting," said executive director Michael H. Martin. "We want patients and their families to be as comfortable as possible when they come for treatment."

In addition to providing a more pleasant environment, the center's new home will triple its working space, allowing it to increase the number of radiation treatment machines it has and to install simulator equipment that can be used in planning treatment for

individual patients without having to use the actual treatment equipment. It will also permit the center to increase its research activities and offer additional counseling services to patients.

Students in the master's program in medical physics of the LSU Department of Nuclear Science will conduct research and work in an internship program at the center. Other students from the LSU School of Social Work will work in the center's counseling program.

"Having this association with LSU gives us the opportunity to work with them on our research," Johnson said. "We can do things not only for the community, but also for the whole medical community as a result of this research emphasis."

Dr. M.J. Rathbone Jr., president of the center's board of directors, said the existing center is treating more than 100 patients a day, but that the new center will be able to handle double that amount.