

Press Release

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Thunder Bay Regional Research Institute unveils state-of-the-art 3T MRI scanner

TBRRI Announces 1st Phase I Clinical Trial in Medical Imaging Research

March 27, 2009, Thunder Bay, ON – Patients at the Thunder Bay Regional Health Sciences Centre (TBRHSC) are now among a select few in Ontario who have access to leading-edge MRI technology and a new clinical research program at the Thunder Bay Regional Research Institute (TBRRI).

Scientists at the TBRRI, in partnership with Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre and Philips Healthcare, will use their respective Philips Achieva 3T MRI scanners to investigate different applications of High-Intensity Focused Ultrasound (HIFU) therapy. HIFU uses ultrasound waves to “cook” and destroy tumours without harming surrounding tissues. MRIs can monitor temperature changes in tissues, so scientists can readily assess the result of the HIFU therapy. This can improve surgical planning and often eliminate the need for surgery altogether, resulting in a lower risk of infection and faster recovery for patients.

The Research Institute introduced the scientists working on the project to the community in September 2008 and unveiled the new technology today. The 3T MRI arrived on March 23, 2009 and the new MRI suite will be fully functional by the end of April.

“Research studies at the TBRRI are always driven by patient care need,” said Keith Jobbitt, Chair of the Board of the Thunder Bay Regional Research Institute. “Today, patients in Northwestern Ontario will, for the first time, have access to Phase I medical imaging clinical trials right here in Thunder Bay. This means our patients will be the first globally to experience these new medical imaging technologies.”

“This is excellent news for patients in Northwestern Ontario,” said MPP Michael Gravelle, Minister of Northern Development and Mines. “This health sciences research initiative, with the support of the Ontario Government, will allow for patients in our region to have access to a vital healthcare service closer to home, while at the same time putting the TBRRI at the forefront of cutting edge medical research and treatment techniques.”

The first HIFU project at the TBRRI will see the investigation of a less invasive, non-surgical approach to eliminating uterine fibroids. TBRRI scientists Dr. Laura Curiel and Dr. Samuel Pichardo will work with Dr. Andrew Siren, an Obstetrician/Gynecologist with TBRHSC, and will begin clinical trials as early as September 2009.

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“HIFU is an elegant technique which has powerful clinical applications. To have access to ‘scalpel free’ surgery is a tremendous opportunity for our institution and its patients. I look forward to the privilege of our clinicians working with scientists, within and outside our institution, who are pioneering this technology.”

The HIFU research initiative is a collaborative research effort between the TBTRI, the TBRHSC and Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre. With 3T MRI’s soon-to-be installed at both sites, TBTRI scientists will collaborate with Dr. Kullervo Hynynen at Sunnybrook Research Institute to explore the use of HIFU as a leading non-invasive therapy for a wide range of medical conditions, from soft-tissue cancer tumours to neurodegenerative disease.

“Together, the TBTRI and Sunnybrook Research Institute, in partnership with Philips Healthcare, are creating an entirely new paradigm for cancer treatment,” said Dr. Michael Julius, Vice-President, Research, Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre. “The establishment of this program is a critical step in this process of innovation. It takes the pioneering work of Dr. Hynynen to the next level with Drs. Curiel and Pichardo in Thunder Bay, and in doing so will get the benefits of discoveries to patients faster.”

The Thunder Bay Regional Research Institute is committed to bringing innovative technologies and techniques to patients in Northwestern Ontario. Not only does this benefit patients, the regional economy will benefit as technology innovations go to market in the global arena.

“Once again Thunder Bay is demonstrating its leading role in health care technology,” said MPP Bill Mauro. “These continuing advances to improve patient care will also attract health care professionals to our region.”

The clinical research project will cost close to \$7 million over the next two years and was funded through investments from Philips Healthcare and the Federal and Provincial governments.

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