

Nonsurgical treatment for cancer, close to home

By Johanna Seltz, Globe Correspondent | June 10, 2007

WEYMOUTH -- The South Shore's first nonsurgical cancer center opened this week with the promise of state-of-the-art care and the opportunity to participate in clinical trials of new treatments.

The Commonwealth Atrius Center, a 22,550- square-foot facility, is in an office park not far from South Shore Hospital.

Dr. Walt A. Kagan, president of Commonwealth Hematology-Oncology, one of the partners in the \$20 million project, said that he originally approached South Shore Hospital officials, but that they declined to participate.

He teamed instead with Atrius Health, the new name for Health One, a healthcare system that consists of five community-based medical groups: Dedham Medical Associates, Granite Medical, Harvard Vanguard Medical Associates, South Shore Medical Center, and Southboro Medical Group. Another group, Alliance Oncology, which designs and builds cancer centers nationally, also is a partner.

South Shore Hospital recently got town approval to build its own cancer center, with Dana Farber Cancer Institute and Brigham and Women's Hospital. "Regrettably, there are enough patients to have two cancer centers in town," said Peg Holda, South Shore Hospital spokeswoman.

"We've been seeing cancer patients in this community for 30 years," Kagan said. "We're not in competition with anyone."

Kagan said his Weymouth practice currently sees about 1,500 to 2,000 patients a year, and he expects that number to rise.

"There are patients who are traveling into Boston who will say, 'I don't need to make that difficult journey any more, especially when I don't feel well,'" he said. "I had lost five or six people in my family to cancer. So [fighting cancer] has been a mission to me, and lots of the staff who are with us."

The center has been accepted by the National Cancer Institute to participate in clinical trials of new cancer therapies, Kagan said. "We hope to enroll our first patient in September. We'll be doing mostly phase three trials -- only drugs that are safe and show some really exciting promise get to phase three. There are probably 50 or 60 in place around the country and we will have access to every single one of them."

Patients in the new cancer center will be able to walk between the offices of specialists, and their medical information will be shared easily and quickly, said Dr. Jeffrey Levin-Scherz, chief medical officer of Atrius Health. "It's exceptionally good for patients," he said.

A key component of the center is the new radiation equipment, including image guided radiation therapy, or IGRT, which has an X-ray and CAT scan built into the machine that delivers radiation. As a result, radiation can be more precisely aimed and avoid normal tissue, the doctors said.

The facility also has the capability for 4-D radiation therapy, "where the fourth dimension is time," Kagan said. "This actually measures the tumor as it's moving and you can turn the machine on when the tumor is in the exact position." ■