

# Back in action

*NIU reopens neutron therapy center at Fermilab*

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**By Larry Avila**

business editor

Regional cancer patients will again have access to a type of treatment only available in Seattle and Detroit the past two years.

Officials with Northern Illinois University and Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory announced Monday that it will reopen the neutron therapy center at the federal lab in Batavia by mid-January. The facility will be called the NIU Institute for Neutron Therapy at Fermilab.

"For many years NIU and Fermilab have collaborated on many projects," said NIU president John Peters during a press conference at the college's Naperville campus. "This will be another long-standing and exciting project we will have with them."

The center's reopening was made possible by a \$900,000 allocation included in the 2004 federal budget approved by Congress last year. House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Yorkville, whose district covers Fermilab and who is a strong supporter of the facility, helped secure the funding.

Hastert has assured NIU and Fermilab that the center will receive another \$900,000 next year and another \$900,000 in 2006.

"All of us know people who are struggling with cancer," Hastert said in a videotaped statement. "All of us have lost friends and loved ones to the disease and all of us hope that research will lead to a cure."

Hastert said that neutron therapy is not new and for some types of cancer treatment has proven to be very effective.

"We need to do more research to understand its full potential and that will only happen through partnerships between major research universities like NIU and major laboratories like Fermilab."

He said that the NIU facility at Fermilab revives an important treatment facility.

"It also furthers the entire field of cancer research because even nonscientists know that cancer isn't a single disease and its cure isn't going to be found in one

single treatment," he said.

Fermilab stopped treating cancer patients in May 2003 after Provena St. Joseph Hospital in Elgin ended its partnership with the lab. At that time, the hospital, which operates an extensive cancer program, cited new innovations and technologies it was utilizing at its main Elgin campus as its reason to end its eight-year collaboration with Fermilab.

Dr. Aidnag Diaz, a physician and nuclear engineer, was introduced as the medical director for the institute.

"Neutron therapy is not experimental and it is not a treatment of last resort," Diaz said.

Arlene Lennox, a medical physicist and manager of the neutron therapy facility at Fermilab since 1985, said that neutron therapy clinical trials began in 1938 but were discontinued at the start of World War II.

Utilizing the technology for cancer treatment did not resurface again until the 1970s, she said. Its effectiveness on some forms of cancer at that time brought the therapy back into the mainstream.

Diaz said the unique feature of neutron treatments, particularly utilizing research equipment at Fermilab, allows high-energy beams to be more focused.

"That allows for deeper penetration and a more targeted focus sparing the surrounding tissues," he said. This also means that fewer treatments will be necessary.

Someone undergoing neutron therapy may only require between 10 and 12 sessions instead of the traditional 20 to 30 treatments required with traditional chemotherapy, Diaz said.

Diaz said neutron therapy is covered under most health insurance programs.

The next step is to begin informing area hospitals that the service is available again, Diaz said.

It is hoped that Fermilab will be able to start treating patients as soon as January. Diaz estimates that the facility will be able to treat between 100 and 120 patients annually.

Like with any radiation treatments, there likely will be side effects, Diaz said.

He said Central DuPage Hospital has partnered with Fermilab and NIU to assist any patients who may need hospitalization and additional care following treatments. NIU staff also will be available to assist in patient care.