

High-tech bombardment of cancer

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It starts with microscopic mayhem.

A cell breaks the normal rules of division and begins to split at an uncontrollable pace. As this uncharacteristic cell proliferation proceeds, a mass is eventually formed.

The mass is a tumor. The disease is cancer.

At one time, the chances of not becoming a casualty of cancer's war on the body were not very good. But advancements in treatment are allowing cancer patients to live longer, if not giving them hope of remission.

Treatment is getting more sophisticated - such as that to be offered in January at Fermilab in Batavia. The federal research facility will make use of a powerful particle accelerator to blast away at cancer cells and tumors.

Actually, this is nothing new. Fermilab had been using this treatment, called neutron therapy, to help more than 3,100 patients over three decades, until a funding crunch forced the facility to close its cancer center in May 2003. But thanks to House Speaker Dennis Hastert, the center will reopen next month. Hastert worked to secure \$2.7 million in federal funds, which should be enough to keep the center running for the next three years.

Equally important, Northern Illinois University has signed on as a partner in this venture. This is key, in that NIU will be doing extensive research on neutron therapy. From this work, there is hope that a clinically proven cancer therapy can be commercially developed outside the laboratory, making it available to more cancer patients.

The wonder of neutron therapy is that it can reach deep, dense malignant tumors that are resistant to more traditional radiation treatments. The neutron therapy treatment regimen is also shorter in duration and relatively pain-free, and there is quicker recovery with fewer side effects. Neutron therapy is particularly effective in treating advanced prostate cancer, head and neck tumors, and cancer of the salivary glands.

It is astonishing that a proven cancer treatment, with so much promise for expansion into the everyday health care delivery system, has had to struggle financially, to the point of patients being temporarily denied access to neutron therapy.

This partnership between Northern Illinois University and Fermilab will now hopefully have a stable source of ongoing funding rather than having to be rescued again. A program with lifesaving results is exactly what needs to be nurtured with federal research dollars.

The money's there. Consider that at the same time Hastert secured a mere \$2.7 million in federal funds for the NIU Institute for Neutron Therapy at Fermilab, Congress was squandering funds on projects of dubious value such as appropriating \$1.5 million for a project to transport naturally chilled water from one

lake to another and \$250,000 for a Country Music Hall of Fame, according to Citizens Against Government Waste.

But of primary importance now is that neutron therapy is available again. High technology is back to giving some cancer patients higher hopes.