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NIU launches neutron therapy institute at Fermilab

BATAVIA — Northern Illinois University will revive a unique and proven cancer treatment that blends advanced medical science with accelerator physics developed at Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory in Batavia.

The newly formed NIU Institute for Neutron Therapy at Fermilab will deliver neutron therapy to patients and conduct extensive research on the high-tech cancer-fighting treatment. Neutron therapy has been shown to be superior for some types of cancer, including adenoidcystic carcinoma, locally advanced prostate cancer, locally advanced head and neck tumors, inoperable sarcomas, and cancer of the salivary glands.

The institute will serve as many as 145 patients annually and could begin treating patients as soon as mid-January. Working in tandem with hospitals in the region, the neutron therapy center at Fermilab treated more than 3,100 patients over nearly three decades. But treatments came to a halt in May of 2003, when a local hospital ended its involvement with the program.

"I'm pleased to announce that Northern Illinois University has brought new life to this important cancer treatment program," said House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Yorkville.

The congressman worked to secure commitments for congressional appropriations of $2.7 million over three years to fund the institute.

"The clinic at Fermilab has provided a viable, important treatment option to thousands of patients, and we couldn't let it disappear," Hastert added. "This new NIU Institute will continue to investigate, document and advance the benefits of this treatment, which is not widely available in the United States."

The NIU Institute for Neutron Therapy will be one of only three sites nationwide to offer the neutron therapy option.

"Fermilab is recognized as a pioneer in the field of neutron therapy," said NIU President John Peters. With the newly combined resources of Fermilab and NIU, we believe the institute will take a leadership role in advancing this form of cancer treatment and making it more universally available."

Neutron therapy is a highly effective form of radiation using neutrons instead of electrons or photons, which are used in conventional radiation treatments. Fermilab's proton linear accelerator generates the neutron beam. It is applied to localized malignant tumors that may occur anywhere in the body and are otherwise inoperable or resistant to conventional radiation.

Because neutrons work so well, neutron therapy patients typically require only 12 treatments over four weeks — compared to 30 to 40 treatments over eight weeks for conventional radiation.