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Group to seek new cancer therapy

Consortium hopes to build center based on carbon ion system, not proton beam.

Christina Rogers / The Detroit News

A multi-hospital consortium established earlier this year to build a shared cancer therapy center in Michigan has decided to pursue a newer technology -- carbon ion therapy -- instead of a proton beam system.

Only three carbon ion facilities are operational worldwide, none of which is in the United States. The costs are steep -- between \$220 million and \$320 million, hospital officials say -- and the therapy has yet to receive Federal Drug Administration approval.

Still, the "technology has a big future," said Dr. Gerhard Kraft, a researcher at a German carbon ion facility who spoke Thursday at Henry Ford Hospital at an informational lecture.

It promises to deliver stronger and more targeted doses of radiation than standard cancer treatment, which uses X-rays and leaves a trail of tissue damage upon exiting and entering the body.

Some experts also believe carbon therapy is superior to proton beams. Both deliver concentrated blasts of radiation to the tumor site, while avoiding healthy tissue, but carbon ions are believed to deliver a stronger dose. A carbon ion facility also has the capability to generate proton beams.

Beaumont Hospitals was the first health system in the state to get approval for a proton beam center. Its \$159 million facility on the Royal Oak campus will open in 2010.

The consortium, whose members attended Thursday's lecture, also has been working to establish a proton beam center, but now has decided to pursue development of a carbon ion center, instead. The group includes Henry Ford Health System, the Barbara Ann Karmanos Cancer Institute, University of Michigan and Ascension Health, which owns St. John Health and the Genesys Hurley Cancer Institute in Flint.

Consortium members are working on a business plan and meeting with equipment vendors, including Siemens AG. They hope to have a plan in place by year's end.

The group also is considering possible sites. The machinery is hefty -- an estimated 600 tons -- and its placement will require numerous topographical studies to ensure the ground beneath it is stable enough, said William Schramm, Henry Ford's senior vice president of strategic business development. Then, it could take another three years to develop the facility, Schramm said.

The consortium was formed this spring in response to a proposed state regulation mandating hospitals to work together to develop a proton beam center, instead of having multiple centers with the costly technology. But that mandate was overturned by Gov. Jennifer Granholm in June, which allowed numerous

health systems to seek state approval for a proton beam center.

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