

'Open' MRI unit caters to claustrophobic patients

Machine uses magnets instead of radiation to see inside patients

By Rebecca Merritt
The Bulletin

An MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) test can be an uncomfortable experience for larger patients or for those who are claustrophobic.

The test, which is used to give doctors images of a patient's internal organs and body structures, requires that patients go through a narrow tunnel with a strong magnetic field.

But now there are options. Two "open" MRI units will be operating in Bend within the next month. They represent the latest in technology.

St. Charles Medical Center, Central Oregon Radiology Associates (CORA) and doctors Michael Kendrick and Norwyn Newby have partnered to bring an open MRI unit to Bend. The scanner, made by General Electric, is housed in a temporary structure near the SurgiCenter at St. Charles and should be ready for patients within the next month.

In the fall, the partners plan to replace it with a more advanced General Electric model with a higher magnetic field, according to Dr. Ron Hanson of CORA. It will be located in the main hospital.

In addition, a separate company is moving forward with plans to operate another open MRI. Advanced Diagnostic Imaging installed a 38,000-pound Hitachi unit scanner last week at their new location on Neff Road near the Ronald McDonald House. Dr. Jay Leeman of Sunriver said the unit should be ready to use by Feb. 1. He also is opening MRI centers in Utah and Mexico.

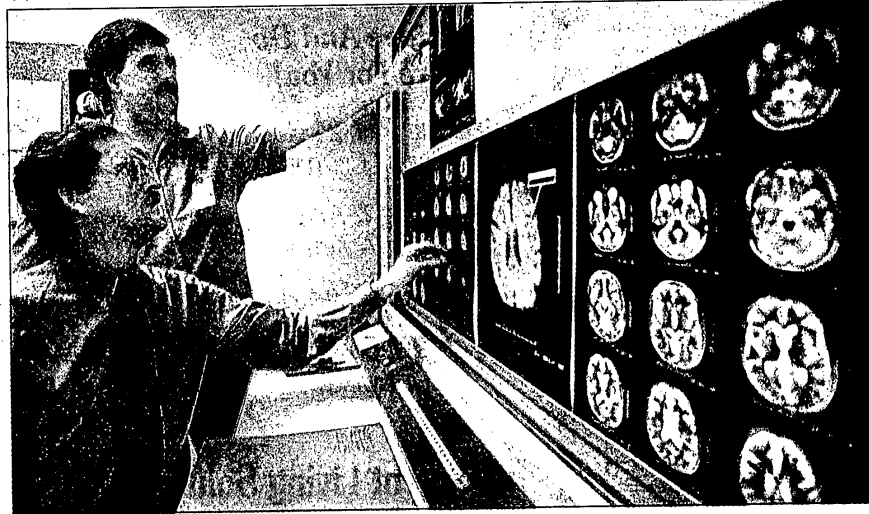
Before these machines were put into place, the closest open MRI was in Portland.

"These machines will be first open-style magnets on the eastside of the Cascades," Leeman said.

The availability of two open MRIs will no doubt make things easier for those who dread small spaces.

"We have patients who are severely claustrophobic who are really not comfortable in the confines of a traditional MRI scanner," Hanson said.

Instead of the small tunnel, the St.



Dean Guemsey / The Bulletin

Above: Technician Joe Passage and Dr. Ron Hanson review images from a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan. The images are used to help doctors diagnose and prescribe treatment for patients.

Right: Local patients will soon have the option of using this new open MRI scanner at St. Charles Medical Center. It's wider than the traditional models and there is room for a family member or friend to sit beside a patient.

"These machines will be first open-style magnets on the eastside of the Cascades."

—Dr. Jay Leeman

Charles MRI scanner takes patients through a wider, rectangular opening. It provides more room for a family member or friend to sit near a patient during the test.



Submitted photo

The scanner at ADI also is more open, featuring a gantry design that allows physicians to perform joint movement studies when gathering images.

This is no small investment for these groups. MRI scanners cost between \$1 million and \$2.5 million.

Hanson said it's worth the investment. MRIs offer fast, accurate pictures inside a patient's body without having to use radiation. Using magnets, radio waves and computers, the scanners create detailed pictures used for diagnosing patients.

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MRI Physicians will have more choices

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For example, when a stroke patient comes in, doctors can use the MRI to look at the brain and determine if treatment is possible.

Hanson and technician Joe Passage said the benefits of their new MRI go beyond just offering more space for patients. For one, having a unit at the hospital will make it faster and easier for emergency room patients to get an MRI done. Before, the only MRIs were located across the street at CORA.

Also, an open scanner will add to the continuum of what's available. Physicians have more choices when deciding what's best for their patients.

Leeman said the scanner at his company will be targeted solely for out-patient use.

"The patients in the area need

something like this," he said.

He said he noticed a large demand for MRI services in Central Oregon about two years ago, when he first started planning for the open MRI center.

He believes the growth in the community can support both of the new scanners.

Local physicians first started using MRIs in 1986, using a portable scanner. The first permanent scanner was purchased in 1991 followed by a second one in 1998. Both are housed at CORA.

Open magnet scanners have been available for about five to six years but now the software has advanced enough so that the images are comparable to the high-field, traditional scanners, Leeman said.

Hanson said he and other local physicians have been watching advancements in MRI technology and a group from Bend even traveled to the General Electric plant last fall to see the prototype of the Open MRI they will have in place in the fall.

"We've been following this very closely," he said.