

Hospital arms race

By Mike Colias
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In a deal that could shake up the competitive landscape for cancer care in Chicago, two renowned hospitals are vying to partner with Northern Illinois University on a massive new radiation treatment center.

Doctors affiliated with Northwestern Memorial Hospital are in talks with NIU to oversee medical care at the university's proposed proton-therapy center, according to a person familiar with the project. NIU expects to treat 1,500 cancer patients a year in West Chicago, where it hopes to build a \$160-million facility to house a giant nuclear accelerator that would produce proton beams to zap tumors — a cutting-edge alternative to traditional radiation therapy.

Also angling to run the center is University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center, the prestigious hospital that already operates one of the nation's five proton-therapy facilities, located on its Houston campus.

A deal with NIU could give Northwestern a marketing edge over local rivals in the heated competition for cancer care. But should NIU ally with M. D. Anderson — rated by *U.S. News and World Report* as the top cancer program in the nation — it could siphon patients from Northwestern and other local players with prominent cancer programs such as University of Chicago Medical Center.

"Having the first (proton-therapy center) in Chicago and the upper Midwest would be a huge coup from a marketing perspective," says Chirag Patel of Skokie-based Sg2, a health care consultancy.

A Northwestern spokeswoman declines to comment on the NIU project.

M. D. Anderson officials have had "informal" talks with NIU and are "open to listening and understanding more" about the project, says Mitch Latinkic, vice-president of global business development for M. D. Anderson.

"It's a very large population base and, frankly, a marketplace that would probably be advantaged by having that unique technology," he says.

John Lewis, an NIU associate vice-president and director of the proton-therapy project, acknowledges the DeKalb school is in talks with two academic medical centers but declines to name them.

Proponents say proton-based radiation is more precise than traditional X-ray radiation, resulting in less damage to healthy tissue around a tumor. They say it's an especially useful weapon against prostate cancer and tumors in children.

But critics say the technology, which requires a concrete-reinforced building nearly the size of a football field, is no better than conventional radiation in most cases and not worth the huge price tag.

"What's behind it is money and marketing, not science," says Ralph R. Weichselbaum, chairman of U of C's department of radiation and oncology. He says U of C has "no interest" in investing in proton therapy because it's no better than X-ray radiation for all but a few rare forms of cancer, like tumors of the eye.

Still, at least 12 proton-therapy centers, many backed by private investors, are being built or planned nationwide.

A key reason: The average cost for a course of treatment is about \$24,000, vs. \$15,000 for X-ray radiation, according to Washington, D.C.-based consultancy Advisory Board Co. Health insurers began covering proton radiation treatments in 2003.

NIU might have a local rival: Central DuPage Hospital in Winfield is seeking state approval to build a \$125-million facility within five miles of NIU's proposed site. Central DuPage has no plans to ally with an academic hospital, Chief Financial Officer Jim Spear says.

Neither project is a certainty: Both require an okay from state regulators.

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