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New approach improves patients' MRI experience at Orillia hospital

BY ANDY SHAW

Stephen Leacock would be proud. Soldiers' Memorial Hospital in Orillia, Ontario – the town Leacock affectionately and humorously cast as Mariposa in his classic *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* – is quite literally letting more sun shine into what can be the dark experience of undergoing a magnetic resonance (MR) examination.

As part of an \$83 million expansion, Soldiers' Memorial has built an enlightened imaging unit that is the first in Canada to fully envelop itself in the "Philips Ambient Experience". The centrepiece of the new Philips suite is a state-of-the-art Achieva 1.5 Tesla MR machine. But more importantly, to both patient and radiologists, the experience of passing through its powerful magnet will be as pleasant and relaxing as it can be.

The Ambient Experience suite enables patients to exercise a good deal of control over their environment. The patient can select their choice of themes from a Wi-Fi touch pad before entering the examination room, they can select its artificial lighting within a wide range of soothing pastels. They can pick music to accompany projected scenes of mountains, lakes, underwater seascapes, and other calming images to play on the walls and ceilings. The idea is that by giving

patients a greater sense of comfort and control over their experience they will be more at ease, less sedation will be needed, and superior imaging will result.

What's more, in Orillia, the imaging suite is not buried in the window-less confines of the basement as it is traditionally in other hospitals. Rather, it is at ground-level, and on the suite's roof, a circle of

Ontario and there we were concerned about sedation rates for diagnostic imaging. So I wondered how we would handle it here in Orillia because we have a huge regional pediatric population," says Schmidt. "Then when we visited the RSNA conference in Chicago we saw the Ambient Experience display at the Philips booth."

Schmidt also learned that a Chicago-area children's hospital had experienced a significant drop in sedation rates as a result of converting its imaging areas to an Ambient Experience suite.

"So both for our younger patients and for older ones, who might be claustrophobic or anxious and who could benefit from having more control, we went with Philips – partly because it is the only vendor out there that provides this fully ambient background," says Schmidt.

"We chose Philips first of all because of the excellence of their equipment, but the Ambient Experience aspect of it was also very important because it fit right in with our aim to make the hospital much more patient focused," says David Lafleche, the director of diagnostic imaging.

But chief radiologist Dr. Mark Swan-



A soothing MRI suite decreases patient anxiety, improves image quality.

skylights above the imaging waiting rooms lets the sunshine pour in.

But the light dawned on Soldiers' Memorial's CEO, Bernie D. Schmidt about the wisdom of making the experience of imaging more ambient some time ago.

"Before coming here to Soldiers', I was at the Children's Hospital of Eastern

son, wasn't so sure about all that, at least at the outset. "I admit I asked at the beginning. 'Why would we want to spend money on something that's just decoration? But as I discovered, it is much more than that. A lot of the people we examine, especially the elderly, aren't coming here under full power. They're sick or they're anxious. But we know now that if they are made to feel better, we can get better images."

For Maida Jerej, Soldiers' Memorial's head MRI technologist, anything that makes the imaging suite look and feel less like a procedure room is highly welcome. "When you can pick a scene and walk into it, whether it is a beach scene or cartoons for kids, and especially if they can bring in a disc and have their own music playing, it makes patients feel this is going to be OK and that I can make it through there."

And they will be going through in some

numbers. Sharon Burkhart, the director of public affairs at Soldiers' Memorial, says the new MRI suite, when fully functional by the latter part of 2007, will provide 3,380 scans per year. "It will initially be funded to run during regular business hours Monday to Friday, plus emergencies at all other times," she adds.

The Achieva 1.5T scanner that's at the core of the suite will complement a 64-slice CT scanner recently acquired with Ontario Health Ministry help. Together with the addition of new digital radiology equipment, the combination will lift Soldiers' Memorial to the status of being a regional centre of excellence for diagnostic imaging in middle Ontario.

"As a radiologist, this all means we will be able to see finer anatomy," says Dr. Swanson. "We'll now be able to see the spinal cord, rather than just the canal, for example. So we'll be able to get closer to the diagnostic truth."

Next milestone for diagnostic imaging head Lafleche will be the selection and integration of a PACS system that will tie all the hospital's imaging modalities together. "Then the images will come to the radiologists, rather than the radiologists having to go to the various modalities to see them."

To make this progress and the Ambient Experience happen, CEO Schmidt had to go to his Board of Directors and the hospital's fund-raising foundation for approvals of the \$7.4 million overall upgrading of Soldiers' Memorial's diagnostic imaging. "Because of the extra technology involved, the Ambient Experience suite is more expensive. But by the time we were done with our presentations and Board discussions about implementing it fully, they were excited and absolutely committed to making it happen," says Schmidt. "Indeed, they felt the Ambient Experience part would help us attract more dollars."

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