S.D. Firm Brings 1st Two Open, Faster MRI Scanners to County

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Medical patients who need magnetic resonance imaging may find an oasis in the countys first two open, faster MRI scanners.

"The closest magnet with these capabilities is in Bakersfield," said Imaging Healthcare Specialists President and Chief Operating Officer Tom Cleary. "Were pretty excited about this - weve been waiting for the bugs to get worked out so we could purchase and use this to make our patients experience far better."

The four-year-old company purchased two Hitachi Oasis magnetic resonance imaging systems for more than $1 million each, according to Cleary. Installation was completed in mid-June at the Fifth Avenue and Upas Street location, and is expected to wrap up in Oceanside in mid-July.

Imaging Healthcare Specialists reported revenues of $65 million last year and has 14 centers and 200 employees (most of whom work in San Diego County).

Open MRIs are not new, but had to be operated at a low magnetic power; the lower power meant patients had to remain still for 45 minutes or more, and that there was a greater risk of blurred images.

"For someone who is in pain, thats a long time to try not to move," said Cleary. "It was a frustrating process and the images were sometimes blurred."

System Benefits Kids, Seniors

The new MRIs have a 270-degree view of the suite and weight limits on the new machines are 600 pounds with the typical exam taking less than 30 minutes.

"The faster magnet totally benefits patients who are claustrophobic or overweight, or children and elderly patients who need to have someone there to comfort them," Cleary said. "Theyve got windows and sunshine in the room."

Ray Wtulich, manager of communications and marketing at Hitachi Medical Systems America Inc., said that the Oasis is a result of the company working on finding a way to boost the magnetic power on open MRI machines.

"Scanning children in a closed MRI is a terrible experience," Wtulich said. "The higher the field strength, the better the image quality and shorter the procedure time."

Image quality, partly determined by the machinery and partly by the software that

sorts out the raw data, is key to changing doctors perception, Cleary said.

"The physician community has not been excited about open magnets in the past because they didnt have the strength to capture sharp images," he said. "If the patient moves now, we can sort through it very effectively with the software."

Once the first Oasis MRI machine was installed, Imaging Healthcare Specialists tried the machines on volunteers, including Cleary.

"We went out to the community, to the University of California San Diego Student Health program, South Bay community clinics and to Project Access, and offered free scans to people who needed them," Cleary said. "We knew we were going to have a couple of weeks where were trying out the magnets."

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