State-of-the-art £1m heart lab for Colchester General Hospital

A state-of-the-art laboratory containing diagnostic equipment worth £1m will go live tomorrow (27th September 2005) at Colchester General Hospital.

It will be the centrepiece of an angiography suite that will be used by consultant cardiologists to take detailed heart x-rays (angiograms) of patients from all over North East Essex.

Until patients started using a temporary unit at Colchester General Hospital in March, all patients from the district requiring angiography had to travel either to Broomfield Hospital, Chelmsford, or, more commonly, the London Chest Hospital for the procedure.

The new permanent suite, which includes a six-bed day ward as well as the laboratory, will at first be used only by outpatients. However, when Essex Rivers Healthcare NHS Trust, which runs Colchester General Hospital, has recruited a third consultant cardiologist the plan is to extend the service to inpatients and also increase the amount of heart pacemaker fitting at the hospital.

Dr Nick Robinson, Trust consultant cardiologist, said: "Heart problems are still the most common cause of death in this country so it is entirely appropriate that we are investing in this very important area of health care which for many years in the past suffered from underinvestment in North East Essex.

"We are not only serving the Colchester area but also Tendring where there are very high numbers of older people who are at risk of heart disease and who should not have the stress of travelling long distances for coronary angiography.

"We will significantly increase our capacity when we take on an extra consultant who, along with the creation of a specialist cardiac centre in Basildon due to open mid-2007, will play a key role in ensuring that the best services in Europe will be available in Essex."

Dr Robinson said the laboratory in the angiography suite was much more spacious than the one it is replacing. In addition, the suite has a spacious day ward within it.

An angiogram, which is carried out under a local anaesthetic, involves inserting a tube (catheter) into the heart either via an arm or leg in order to take detailed images of the heart for diagnostic purposes.

The types of patient undergoing cardiac angiography at Colchester include those with angina, people who have experienced a heart attack and people with valvular heart disease, which most commonly involves the narrowing or leaking of heart valves. Patients who have already had bypass
surgery sometimes have an angiogram to allow cardiologists to check the condition of their grafts.

Patients who subsequently require invasive treatment, such as bypass surgery or more commonly the insertion of stents to open up narrowed arteries, are currently treated by Dr Robinson at the London Chest Hospital. From mid-2007 their treatment will take place at the Essex Cardiothoracic Centre in Basildon.

It is anticipated that about 40% of patients who have an angiogram at Colchester will just need medicines, another 40% or so stenting and the remainder bypass surgery.

The temporary unit, comprising a relocatable unit, will be moved from Colchester General Hospital now that the angiography suite has gone operational. Both have been provided by Cardinal InHealth, of High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire.

The company is also supplying a cardiac nurse, a cardiac technician and a radiographer although Essex Rivers Healthcare hopes to provide these staff in the future.

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