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Celebrating the 60th anniversary of the world's first cancer treatment with Cobalt-60 radiation

October 27, 2011

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On October 27, 1951, the world's first cancer treatment with Cobalt-60 radiation took place at Victoria Hospital. This marked an important milestone for both the fight against cancer and Canada's emergence as a leader in the field of radiotherapy. Today, London Health Sciences Centre is pleased to acknowledge the 60th anniversary of this tremendous medical breakthrough.

Revolutionizing cancer treatment throughout the world, the Eldorado Cobalt-60 radiation technology, nicknamed the "Cobalt Bomb", was first installed at LHSC on October 23, 1951. Just four short days later, its widely-publicized first medical use took place under the leadership of Dr. Ivan Smith.

"The development of Cobalt-60 radiation therapy opened a window into the human body and for the very first time in history, we were able to treat deep-seated tumours without hurting the skin," says Dr. Jerry Battista, Director, Physics Research and Education at LHSC's London Regional Cancer Program. "This was the first major advancement in the radiation treatment of all cancers, aside from skin cancer, since Roentgen's discovery of X-rays in 1895."

Despite advances made in radiation therapy technology, the Cobalt-60 unit remains the world's main radiotherapy machine. Due to its cost effectiveness, reliability and ease of use, it is prevalent in developing countries. Cobalt-60 technology is currently used to treat roughly 70 per cent of the world's cancer cases treated by radiation. LHSC's last Cobalt treatment was delivered in 2004.

To date, approximately 35 million cancer patients worldwide have benefitted from this groundbreaking technology that was first applied at London Health Sciences Centre 60 years ago.

London Health Sciences Centre continues to be a leader in driving discovery and innovation. Our staff, physicians, and scientists are recognized internationally for the significant contributions they have made towards the advancement of medicine. We also teach thousands of health care professionals from across Canada and around the world. Through these activities, London Health Science Centre is improving the lives of people everywhere.

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