

## **Digitizing Mammography**

**Inland Imaging LLC puts \$2.5 million into equipment; others to deploy technology**

By [Emily Brandler](#)

Health-care providers in the Spokane area have started offering digital mammography services, and say the technology detects breast cancer better than film-based mammography in some instances.

Clinical studies, including one published recently in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, have shown that digital mammography technology has a higher detection rate for breast cancer than film-based mammography among some groups of women, experts here say. They say digital mammography also is less time-consuming for patients and more flexible for those who read the tests—and who can access images electronically thanks to the technology.

In September, Inland Imaging LLC, of Spokane, converted to digital mammography from film-based mammography. It now offers the digital services to patients at outpatient imaging centers in Sacred Heart Medical Center, in Holy Family Hospital, and in its own office in Spokane Valley, says Dr. Cindy Tortorelli, a clinical breast imaging specialist at Inland Imaging.

The company bought \$2.5 million worth of equipment, which includes Lorad Selenia digital mammography systems, she says. Lorad is the Danbury, Conn.-based division of Hologic Inc., a Bedford, Mass.-based developer, manufacturer, and supplier of diagnostic and medical imaging equipment.

Digital mammography has been shown to surpass film-based mammography in detection of cancer in women who have dense breasts, in premenopausal and perimenopausal women, and in women under age 50, Tortorelli says.

Meanwhile, Empire Health Services Inc., of Spokane, plans to buy a digital mammography machine soon and to start offering that technology to patients at Deaconess Medical Center's breast evaluation center by the end of March, says spokeswoman Christine Varela.

An estimated cost for that equipment isn't available yet, Varela says. Safeway Inc. stores in Eastern Washington and North Idaho raised \$87,500 in October for breast cancer awareness, and Empire will use all of that money to help buy the equipment, she says.

Empire hopes to buy a second digital mammography system for Deaconess and another that would be housed at Valley Hospital & Medical Center, but it doesn't know yet when those purchases would occur, she says.

"Right now we're setting our sights on one machine, and once that's done we'll start transitioning out of film," Varela says.

Kootenai Medical Center in Coeur d'Alene also plans to implement digital mammography services and currently is considering how to do so, says Scott Venera, director of radiology services at KMC.

"KMC is actively reviewing digital mammography, and planning to incorporate it into its imaging services," but wants to do so in "a cost-effective way," Venera says.

Digital mammography uses digital equipment and computers to produce an image that can be

displayed on a high-resolution computer monitor and also can be stored as a computer file for later use, Tortorelli says. Both digital mammography and film-based mammography use X-rays to create images of the breast, but digital mammography produces images that appear on technologists' monitors within seconds, allowing for a shorter exam time, she says.

The electronic images can be transmitted quickly to other medical experts for evaluation, whereas such subsequent evaluations formerly were dependent on other experts seeing a set of the original films, she says.

Inland Imaging radiologists can magnify digital images of different parts of breast tissue, which sometimes can eliminate the need to take additional images, thereby reducing a patient's cumulative exposure to radiation, she says. Inland Imaging uses computer-aided detection technology to bring suspicious areas on a digital mammogram to a radiologist's attention.

Research shows that applying computer-aided detection to mammograms boosts breast cancer detection rates by 10 percent, she says.

"I can look at a case miles away and give a valid interpretation," says Dr. Florence Gin, Inland Imaging's section chief of breast imaging. "During a breast conference with several medical professionals, we can call up a colleague who can look at the image immediately."

Gin says digital images also can be stored far more efficiently than film images, saving space at health-care facilities.

Inland Imaging, which performs about 200 mammography exams a day in the Spokane area, hopes to collaborate with health-care providers in rural areas to introduce digital mammography in those rural areas so images can be sent rapidly to experts here who can read them, she says.

The first digital mammography system was approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in 2000, says the National Cancer Institute's Web site. Gin says the technology has been available for a long time, but has become more prevalent at health-care facilities in the past several years because of improvements in image resolution and size.

"Some of the problems with digital mammography have now been perfected, so its moment has come, and it's here to stay," Gin says.

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