Bringing World-Class Cancer Treatments to Patients in Southeast Ireland: A Unique Public-Private Partnership with UPMC Provides Care Closer to Home
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To meet the need for advanced cancer treatment in rural southeast Ireland, the country’s health and social services department — the Health Service Executive (HSE) — entered into a unique public-private partnership with UPMC to build a radiation oncology center. The collaboration led to the creation of the UPMC Whitfield Cancer Centre in Waterford, Ireland. This marked the first international location of UPMC CancerCenter, an integrated community network of comprehensive care facilities, cancer physicians, and other health care specialists.

Since the start of the partnership, the HSE and UPMC shared expertise and assets, working together to implement quality oversight, advanced medical training, performance data tracking, and research programs at Whitfield. UPMC’s support has helped Whitfield to not only offer the most advanced radiation oncology therapy available, but also set a precedent in Ireland for providing world-class cancer care to patients closer to their homes.
Because I have two children and it would be very difficult to travel every day, five days a week, for six weeks,” remarked Noelle Harshley, a cancer patient in rural southeast Ireland. “Near impossible.”

In some cases, patients opted to forego radiotherapy, choosing faster, more radical surgical alternatives to avoid these obstacles altogether. Many times, these surgeries were unnecessary or were not the optimal recourse to ensure remission of a particular type of cancer.

Prior to 2006, the HSE maintained a cancer care delivery system that concentrated facilities in large metropolitan areas like Dublin, Cork and Galway. Patients in more remote parts of Ireland faced considerable hardships in accessing advanced cancer treatments in a consistent and effective manner, with common obstacles including financial pressures, travel challenges and familial considerations.

“If I had to travel to Cork or Dublin for my radiotherapy treatments...even thinking about it sends shivers down my spine...
UPMC AND THE HSE FORM A UNIQUE PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

To address these difficulties and provide care for patients closer to home, local leaders approached the HSE to appeal for an advanced radiation oncology treatment center in Waterford, the largest city in the southeastern region of Ireland.

Because Waterford offered no advanced oncology care services — particularly those featuring outpatient radiotherapy — the HSE and local doctors reached out to UPMC for expertise and guidance in developing a high-level, quality cancer care solution for the area’s patients.

“A group of us took a trip over to Pittsburgh to have a look at the establishment of radiotherapy in that area. ...We had a very successful trip, and there is no doubt as a result of that, we were able to sway the [radiotherapy review group under the Ministry of Health] to implement a centralized service,” recalled Dr. Gordon Watson, chairman of the South East Radiotherapy Trust and retired consultant surgeon.

The Irish cancer-treatment leaders soon finalized their commitment to collaborate with UPMC. The arrangement immediately connected the Cancer Centre to the expertise, technology, education, research and treatment capabilities available through the network of UPMC Cancer Centers. It also granted access to oncology experts in Pittsburgh and to other UPMC personnel that provided education and implementation support for the technologies to be used at the Cancer Centre.

“We were able to meet with UPMC leadership, witness firsthand how things were being run, and receive training in some of the technologies we were about to use,” said Dr. Dayle Hacking, a radiation oncologist at Whitfield Cancer Centre and UPMC Ireland’s medical director.

“We came with nearly three decades of experience building cancer centers, and we believed a cancer center in Waterford could gain from our knowledge, including the hard lessons we learned that led to our own success,” said Charles Bogosta, President of UPMC International Services and UPMC CancerCenters, of the partnership.
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UPMC Whitfield Cancer Centre, which brought together UPMC’s advanced oncology expertise with the HSE’s funding and access to patients, accepted its first private patient in November 2006 and its first public patient in March 2007.

Equipped with additional clinical technology and expertise, the Ireland team could now address a wider range of patient needs: “Now we had not only surgeons, we had chemotherapy; we had medical oncologists, but now we also had radiation oncologists, and of course, that fit in with the development of multidisciplinary cancer care,” explained Dr. Watson.

Today, the Cancer Centre offers the most advanced radiation therapy treatments available, including 3D conformal radiation therapy, intensity modulated radiation therapy (IMRT), image guided radiation...
therapy (IGRT), 4D planning and respiratory gating, PET/CT scanning, and a prostate brachytherapy program. The Cancer Centre invested in a second linear accelerator and protective bunker to further reduce patient wait times and improve outcomes; it is also expanding brachytherapy services for prostate cancer treatment.

Radiation therapy outpatient services presently make up more than 95 percent of Whitfield’s treatments. The center also offers patients and families nutrition advice, symptom and side effect management, psychological and counseling services, educational resources and access to home health care and support groups.

To optimize treatment, all performance data is rigorously tracked and reported to national regulatory agencies, including the National Cancer Control Programme, the National Cancer Registry and the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland. UPMC Whitfield Cancer Centre is pursuing an IT-based record-keeping strategy, providing the Irish health care system with access to information at the time of decision making; this will allow all information to be recorded for analysis of key performance indicators, as well as more complex outcome analysis.

Additionally, as part of an ongoing collaborative effort, the Cancer Centre accepts referrals from, and conducts clinical visits at, four public hospitals in the southeast region of Ireland. It is also closely aligned with the area’s private medical facilities, the Irish Cancer Society and many other regional medical and community agencies.

“The situation in the southeast of Ireland was very different when I arrived here,” said Dr. Hacking. “UPMC provided many different forms of support, including technical, clinical and administrative, to elevate the standard of care — and they did it very quickly.”
More than 1,000 people are treated annually at UPMC Whitfield Cancer Centre. Since its inception, significant increases have been observed every year in the treatment of breast, lung, prostate and skin cancers. In total, the Cancer Centre has completed almost 5,300 rounds of oncology care for a variety of cancer types. Thousands of residents of southeast Ireland have benefited, directly and indirectly, from the clinic’s construction.

Many attribute the location’s ongoing growth and success to the seamless integration between the UPMC and Ireland teams, as well as the Cancer Centre’s strong relationships and transparency both inside the clinic and with the surrounding community.

“To have [cancer treatment facilities] in small towns is so important for the people that live there. And because it is a big deal to have to travel, to have it on your doorstep is very important for the client as well as their family,” explained Ms. Harshley, a former patient at the Centre.

“Understandably, the project was met with some skepticism at first,” said Catriona McDonald, director of operations for UPMC Whitfield Cancer Centre. “There hadn’t been a fully private clinic like ours before. ... But now, Whitfield is a focal point of the community and is absolutely viewed as a huge asset. We had to prove ourselves before that could happen.”

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Since opening, UPMC Whitfield Cancer Centre has become the first clinic in Ireland to achieve major oncology milestones, such as introducing DIBH breast and gated radiotherapy delivery; offering PET/CT planning and transatlantic D3 IMRT planning; and allowing radiation oncologists to deliver IV contrast, perform PET/CT scans and use CT simulation during first clinical visits.

“To have the facility here in Waterford was just unbelievable. .... It’s only out the road, an hour is all I was here for, every single day, and it was just amazing and a fantastic facility,” remarked Ms. Harshley. “A brilliant, brilliant idea.”

The Cancer Centre has been accredited by the Joint Commission International and Ambulatory Care Standards and continues to further benchmark its performance against quality metrics in the United States.

Recently, Whitfield was nominated for the third time, by staff and patients, for the Irish Institute of Radiography and Radiation Therapy (IIRRT) and MEDRAY award for Department of the Year. Patient and staff surveys further reflect the enormous pride and satisfaction levels surrounding the Cancer Centre.

“We have a truly amazing network of dedicated providers working hand-in-hand to coordinate cancer care for patients in this region,” said Ms. McDonald. “Whitfield has become recognized as the template for future public-private health care partnerships in Ireland.”

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Dr. Dayle Hacking, Radiation Oncologist at UPMC Whitfield Cancer Centre and UPMC Ireland’s Medical Director
ABOUT UPMC

UPMC’s objective is to share our clinical, technological and managerial knowledge and expertise with partners around the world, customizing solutions so that patients and regions benefit and thrive. We believe everyone should have access to the best possible care, without having to leave their country or region.

About Us

UPMC, an academic medical center affiliated with the University of Pittsburgh, is a recognized leader in providing health care services in the United States and internationally.

Through UPMC International Services, we are able to offer a full range of health consulting services. By collaborating with UPMC, our multi-disciplinary team can provide customized solutions, on-the-ground support and direct access to deep clinical expertise and operational knowledge.

Our goal is to work side-by-side with our partners from start to finish, until we both agree that the work is done. We can assess needs, build the right hospital and infrastructure, provide education and design customized clinical programs. We can also work with our partners’ doctors and staff to ensure that entire team understands their roles in building and maintaining an excellent health care system.

By working with UPMC to identify and implement customized solutions, our partners’ give patients in their area access to the best possible health care, become a magnet for patients from other regions and support growth of their local economies.

You can learn more about the services we offer here: www.UPMCInternational.com.
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