

St. Mary's gets funding for life-saving heart-monitoring device

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KITCHENER — St. Mary's General Hospital got a funding boost of more than \$2.3 million to implant and monitor a life-saving heart device that until now required patients to travel outside the region.

That new provincial money also came with up to another \$930,000 in base and one-time funding to pay for an additional 200 cardiac procedures, including heart valve surgeries, angioplasty and pacemaker surgeries.

Currently, St. Mary's Regional Cardiac Care Centre monitors about 400 patients annually who went outside the region to get an implantable cardioverter defibrillator (ICD), a small battery powered device implanted in patients who are at risk of a fatal arrhythmia.

"These devices save people's lives," said Dr. Stuart Smith, chief of cardiovascular services.

The rhythm of a patient's heart is tracked and the device can give a high-voltage jolt when there's a dangerous heartbeat change. A transmitter can also send vital information from the patient's home to the hospital to alert health-care staff to potentially fatal issues.

It can even improve how the heart functions by synchronizing its beating, which boosts the patient's quality of life.

"They're a marvel of engineering for the group of patients who need it, a great advance," said cardiologist Dr. Claus Rinne.

The first is expected to be implanted at January at St. Mary's, which will also look after care before and after the surgery.

Hospital president Don Shilton said the new service means St. Mary's now can offer total cardiac care, making the experience seamless for heart patients.

The hospital's foundation will also launch a campaign to further develop the arrhythmia program, which includes the implantable cardioverter defibrillators, to be able to diagnose and treat electrical issues.

Heart disease is not just due to pumping problems, such as clogged arteries, but also electrical. Sudden death caused by electrical issues are unpredictable, which is why the ICD is invaluable to immediately respond to lethal arrhythmias.

Wellesley heart patient Errol Duke had one implanted in 2004 in London, recommended by Rinne when Duke suddenly collapsed after years dealing with heart failure.

"It's made my life a heck of a lot easier," said Duke, 74.

He feels more comfortable knowing it's always keeping track of his heart rate and can handle any dangerous disturbance. After many trips to London, he is thankful the surgery can be done in Kitchener for new patients who need the device.

“They’re going to be very, very fortunate,” Duke said. “I’m so glad this is happening at St. Mary’s.”

After Thursday’s announcement, Duke met with registered nurse Irene Janzen in the device clinic to check on all the things his heart device monitors. Along with helping a patient feel better, Janzen said the device is like an ambulance attendant on your shoulder, ready to take action in an emergency.

Janzen said it’s overwhelming for patients to hear they need to get one, and then find out they must go elsewhere for the surgery.

“It’s really important to patients to feel we can provide all the care.”

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