A day in the life of the Radiotherapy radiographer

This month Michelle Price, Radiotherapy Practice Educator, talks us through several key roles of a Radiotherapy radiographer. As discussed in the last issue of Talk About the department is currently involved in the ‘Year of Radiotherapy’, a national campaign to raise awareness for radiotherapy.

“Radiotherapy/therapeutic radiographers use high energy ionising radiation to plan and treat malignant disease (cancers) and benign conditions; they work in the Radiotherapy Department and are different to diagnostic radiographers. Radiotherapy radiographers undertake a degree in radiotherapy and oncology.

Radiotherapy radiographers operate highly specialised technical equipment whilst providing support to patients and their carers during the radiotherapy process. A day in the life of a radiographer is very diverse depending on their specific role and the area of the radiotherapy department they are allocated to. The two main areas of work are radiotherapy planning and the treatment floor. Here are some examples of the sort of work a radiographer may do:

Radiotherapy planning
The radiographers are responsible for taking images with the CT scanner or simulator equipment and using specialised computer software for mapping out the best way to treat the tumour (cancer) inside the patient. They work with doctors for guidance on the patient’s illness and take a series of images and measurements. They have to consider where the tumour is and how to give the best dose of radiation to the tumour, whilst sparing some of the healthy tissue. Some planning can be led by radiographers if they have undertaken specialised postgraduate training. Patients are often nervous about radiotherapy and the planning department will usually be their first experience of it. The radiographers need to spend time talking to patients, explaining the procedures and reassuring them. The planning process takes longer than treatment. An average day involves scanning or imaging 10–15 patients, booking in new patient appointments, undertaking radiation mathematical calculations, reviewing digital images of the body and discussing planning methods with medical physics staff or doctors.

They also work closely with the medical technical officer who is responsible for the Mould Room. The Mould Room is where special equipment is made to help patients stay in the correct position for treatment so the radiation is delivered accurately.

Computer planning
The computer planning radiographers work within the Medical Physics Department. They use specialised computer software and digital patient images to calculate the affects of radiation on the patient’s anatomy and the tumour. Their work tends to occur behind the scenes and a typical day will involve analysing data and images and reviewing options available, alongside clinicians and medical physicists. They are also involved in quality assurance checks on the data produced and providing expert radiation dosimetry advice to other members of the multi-disciplinary team.”

Radiotherapy radiographers work as part of a wide ranging team. Other roles that are undertaken by radiographers include: radiotherapy services/deputy radiotherapy services manager, quality manager and practice educator. Please see the intranet for further information on these roles.

Treatment radiographers
Treatment radiographers work in small teams of two or three on a treatment unit. They have responsibility for using the treatment machine to deliver highly accurate radiation treatment. The majority of the day involves operating the equipment, whilst providing advice and reassurance to the patients who can be distressed and anxious about their illness and the treatment. They work in a busy environment treating 30-40 patients a day, each with a ten minute appointment. They have to be able to communicate and develop a rapport with patients in a short amount of time; they see the same patients over several days and sometimes for up to seven weeks. Their work also involves having discussions with the patients and carers on their first day about what the treatment involves and the side effects they may experience. They are often required to liaise with other health professionals such as clinical nurse specialists, doctors, medical physicists or dieticians to provide the best possible care for the patient.

Amendment: In last month’s Talk About we reported that the Bracknell Clinic team had visited two similar sites at Clatterbridge and Oldham. Apologies, this information is incorrect; they actually only visited Oldham.