

A Liberating Backdrop for Radiation Therapy

With its idyllic location and distinctly non-stereotypical treatment environment, a progressive private radiation facility in rural Bavaria is an unlikely vanguard for reforms in European health care, partnering with Siemens Medical Solutions to become a model of the latest technological advances in medical and administrative systems.

By Haig Simonian

LIGHT YEARS AWAY from depression: the stylish, yet natural architecture and design of the Radiology Center in Passau, Germany. From above: The linear accelerator, the reception area and the waiting room with its Zen garden.

The Danube River flows wide but fast through Passau, the old university town where Germany meets the Czech Republic and Austria amid green fields and rolling hills.

But for all its centuries of tradition, Passau, an isolated location on the eastern fringe of Bavaria, with a population of just 50 000, is hardly a cosmopolitan center. Not, at least, the sort of place where you would expect to find a privately run radiological clinic of a size and technological standard to match some of Europe's biggest teaching hospitals. How the Passau practice, opened in April 2004 and owned by nine partners, was established and has flourished, is an extraordinary tale of entrepreneurship against the challenging backdrop of upheavals in public sector healthcare across Europe.

The latest move by the Passau radiologists to further their ambitions by expanding into

therapy also demonstrates how cooperation between medical practitioners and a leading manufacturer like Siemens can ultimately benefit both sides.

"We wanted to achieve the highest standards of care," say Dr. Stefan Braitinger and Dr. Bertram Rosskopf, heads of the practice. They are clearly passionate about the private sector's potential to address issues caused by increasingly stretched public budgets, they provide the new therapy center with all the energy of men who have seen part of a medical dream come true.

High Tech + Harmony = Healing

The new unit is certainly light years away from the traditional, sometimes depressing, stereotype of a traditional radiation therapy center. No one pretends this is a funfair:



“We really challenged Siemens. They knew there were very competent people here and we wouldn’t accept anything but the very best.”

Dr. Bertram Rosskopf, Head of the Radiologische Gemeinschaftspraxis, Passau, Germany

patients are here because they are very sick, and radiation therapy is a lifeline.

But it is hard to imagine an environment more conducive to recovery than that created by Dr. Braitering’s team. Architecture and design have worked together to form surroundings which put people at ease. Subdued lighting, mellow colors and natural materials abound. Small touches, like artfully arranged stones hinting at Zen gardens, provide an additional sense of harmony, while inner courtyards and gardens remind patients that nature is not far away.

Inside the treatment rooms, state-of-the-art technology from Siemens leaves nothing to chance. From high-tech linear accelerators to banks of advanced computer systems, it is an environment that would help to put even the most nervous patient at ease, improving their recovery potential.

Such investments do not come cheap. Building and equipping the new center, built largely underground on a vacant lot next to the practice’s established diagnostics building, cost several million euro. Annual running costs add to the price tag. Even for a large, established practice, such steps are not taken lightly – especially considering the personal financial risk to the partners.

“We had always wanted to expand from diagnostics to therapy – it’s a natural progression for every radiologist. And, although Passau may not be a big city, we were confident we had the potential,” explains Dr. Braitering.

The practice is one of only a handful of its size in Germany. Growth has been stimulated by legislation giving the private sector greater access to what was once almost exclusively public sector terrain. The mentor

to Dr. Braitering and his three other founding partners was Professor Alfred Breit, a pioneering Bavarian radiologist and academic who lobbied tirelessly for more entrepreneurial solutions to problems in the public health system.

New German laws since the mid-1970s have created unprecedented opportunities for outsourcing and even joint ventures. By 1991, Dr. Braitering and his colleagues decided to leave Passau’s city hospital, where they had worked under Professor Breit, to set up their own facility.

“We wanted to create a patient-oriented practice. We knew patients would come, especially once their referring doctors were aware of what we had to offer,” he recalls. “One of our most important aims is to aid our patients’ recovery.”

Creating a Prescription for Success

Today, the practice is the size of a small company, with nine partners, 70 employees and annual revenues of about 10 million euro. Last year, an astonishing 79 000 patients were treated at the Passau base and its satellites established in recent years. A further 23 500 patients were handled through arrangements with local hospitals.

But even for a practice of such magnitude, branching out into radiation therapy required intricate analysis and preparation – and not just in terms of medical equipment. This marked the point where Siemens came in.

Based on their medical judgement and business acumen, Dr. Braitering and his colleagues knew that they had a strong case for going ahead. What they needed was a



Biography of Dr. Stefan Braitinger

Stefan Braitinger was born in Ulm, in southern Germany, and studied medicine in Regensburg and Munich. The son of a neurologist, he was expected to take over his father's practice until exposure to radiology early in his career took him down a different track. Married with one daughter, the 48-year-old Dr. Braitinger has spent the bulk of his career in Passau. A keen

musician – hip jazz is his specialty – he takes time off in his recording studio and has already released several CDs. Is there any link with high-tech radiotherapy? "There's no link at all," he says, "apart from the fact that the studio is a great place to wind down after all the daily tension."



CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT:
The waiting area, the control room, therapy planning and the reception area.

convincing business plan showing their gut feeling was justified by the facts.

In months of meetings, Dr. Braitinger, accompanied by Dr. Gerd Schenk, a medical physicist at the practice, discussed costs, patient numbers, and hypothetical revenues with a team from the Health Care Consulting Group of Siemens Medical Solutions. Initially, they sat down together to examine the general surroundings in terms of demographics and medical trends, before turning to more detailed analyses.

The calculations were not easy – even for experienced physicians and managers. Would local doctors support the therapy center as strongly as the diagnostics unit? What might be the breakdown between patients funded by the state health care system versus those with private insurance? Many other things had to be cleared up front.

Such services are an essential part of Siemens' attempts to provide customers not only with equipment, but also with the sort of broader consulting expertise that can ease their decision making.

"In developing a business plan, Siemens set out scenarios for costs, revenues, and cash flow to show how many patients we would need to make the investment worthwhile," recalls Braitinger. "It was a thoroughly professional consulting service."

Full Integration into the Existing Environment

The task was not easy, given the range of variables and the tough parameters established by Dr. Braitinger and his colleagues. From the outset, they not only wanted the best hardware, but also a sophisticated information technology package that would reduce bureaucracy, eliminate paperwork, and ensure the best levels of patient care.

"We wanted the new radiotherapy unit to be fully integrated into our existing radiological activities, particularly as far as IT was concerned. That meant only one patient file, one picture archive, and all of this on a joint IT platform," he says. The entire practice is fully digital, improving efficiency and ensuring the security of data on patients, who may,

considering their illnesses, have to return in the months or years ahead.

"It was something only Siemens could offer at the quality levels we required. As a result, we achieved the maximum efficiency improvements and processing economies we needed."

Mutually Rewarding Cooperation

The outright professionalism of his partners at Siemens and their ability to understand his practice's needs is what Dr. Braitinger says impressed him most. "The depth of knowledge and professionalism of the people we were dealing with stood out. The people in charge were first class: knowledgeable, motivated and very professional. The whole planning process was conducted with great transparency and seriousness. And we were impressed by the company's customer focus and readiness to alter its plans as circumstances changed."

The results, in the new center's opening months, have already exceeded expectations, reports Dr. Braitinger. "Patients like it; they seem happy to come here, and are even tending to stick around and pass time talking to each other," he says. "That's extraordinarily positive. We've been treating more than 60 patients a day, and the number is rising. We're already up to levels we hadn't expected until the end of the third year. That puts us much closer to break even than we ever expected."

Dr. Braitinger and his colleagues stress that such results stemmed primarily from the close cooperation established with Siemens. Beaming with confidence, they even hint that the company may have benefited too, in terms of direct insights into daily practice life. "Siemens proved itself to be a reliable and competent partner in planning and executing the new unit. Perhaps we also contributed something to the company's knowledge. And that's the basis for a solid, ongoing cooperation."

Author: Haig Simonian is the Zurich correspondent for the Financial Times.



DR. GERD SCHENK
(above) and **DR. BERND J. DITTMANN** (below).