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High-tech in the hospital Ruppiner Kliniken is investing in new technology for the 25,000 inpatients it admits each year

By Ute Sommer

Two black metal boxes, each about the size of a microwave oven, with frantically blinking green LEDs – this is where Ruppiner Kliniken GmbH in Neuruppin (district of Ostprignitz-Ruppin) stores its images. Each year about 25,000 people are admitted to the hospital for inpatient treatment. All the X-rays, ultrasound scans and MRIs performed on them here are stored in these two little boxes. Ruppiner Kliniken began saving images in this way about seven years ago, explains Sven Jonseck, system administrator for the radiology department. Today the job is „fully digitised" and doctors can access their patients' images from any ward in the hospital.

The technology has dramatically reduced the time doctors need to make diagnoses, says Rainer Grieg, chief radiologist. No longer do they need to wait to show the images to their colleagues and get their opinion. It also enables the town's radiologic clinic, which the hospital collaborates with, to access the shared archive of images stored in the two units.

Ruppiner Kliniken in Neuruppin is one of five key hospitals in the state of Brandenburg. The 800-bed facility has all the services required to meet any medical need, from obstetrics, surgery and neurology to cancer treatment and geriatrics. Managing director Horst-Michael Arndt, who has been in charge of Ruppiner Kliniken since 1990, wants the facility to „offer or develop the best-available treatments in every area of medicine". The hospital is run by the district council. This, according to Arndt, gives the hospital the freedom it needs to reinvest profits in new high-tech projects.

One area which Ruppiner Kliniken has been investing in for the past ten years is telemedicine, which uses IT and communications technology to provide important medical services. Patients with an irregular heartbeat, for instance, often show no symptoms of arrhythmia during a visit to the doctor.

Giving patients a cardiac transmitter to take home enables their doctor to check their heartbeat remotely, says Kurt **SCHMAILZL**, head of cardiology. The transmitter is the size of a credit card and has electrodes on the back. When patients notice that their heart is acting strangely, they can place the transmitter on their chest to automatically record their heart rhythm. A single phone call to the hospital alerts doctors, who can then look at the data on the transmitter remotely to determine whether or not the patient has a serious health problem.

Cardiologist **SCHMAILZL** considers telemedicine to be an exciting, essential service. Yet he is disappointed that whenever the service is discussed outside the medical community, the focus is on how much it costs, and it thus comes in for excessive criticism for being too expensive. The incredible potential that new medical technologies present for development in the region are ignored, he says.

Pro Klinik Holding GmbH, which owns Ruppiner Kliniken, employs 2,000 people in the region. Of those, 1,300 work at the hospital. Last year Ruppiner Kliniken added a real gem to its collection: a 3-Tesla MRI unit. Until that time, most of the hospital's magnetic resonance imaging machines were 1.5 Tesla, says the managing director. The investment makes Ruppiner Kliniken the first hospital in Brandenburg with a machine of this calibre. Having a magnetic field twice the strength of other machines speeds up the imaging process and provides more detailed images of the inside of patients' bodies. But regardless of what machine is used, all the images they deliver are stored in those same two microwave-sized boxes.