

Hospital's cardiac ward enters nuclear age

By Joseph Hall Toronto Star

North York General Hospital's cardiology ward is moving into the big leagues of medicine, using nuclear technology to plumb the secrets of the heart.

The hospital's nuclear cardiology unit, which was unveiled last week, will allow a specially trained team of doctors and technicians to probe for weaknesses in heart tissue without the use of more dangerous and expensive traditional techniques.

The \$320,000 unit is equipped

with a thallium scanner, which plots weak spots in the heart tissue using state-of-the-art computer equipment, says Dr. Douglas Shatz, the unit's director.

"What it allows us to do is look inside the heart chamber in a non-invasive way," Shatz says.

Patients using the equipment are placed on a treadmill, then injected with a harmless amount of radioactive thallium when the heart reaches its maximum stress level.

When the heart, which is moni-

tored by an electrocardiogram, reaches that point, the patient is put on a scanning table, where computer images of the heart are generated and examined by the physicians on the machine's four screens.

"The thallium reaches the blood vessels in the heart muscle and the scanner picks it up, allowing us to trace constricted or damaged vessels," says Dr. Douglas Lubelsky, who was trained on the equipment at Toronto General Hospital.

"It allows us to locate defects in

the heart and prescribe either medical therapy — just pills — or surgery," Lubelsky says.

In many cases, the scanner eliminates the need for angiograms, which require doctors to snake tubes through blood vessels directly into the heart.

"This (the angiogram) is an excellent technique but it's dangerous (about 1 in 1,500 patients die) and expensive," Lubelsky says.

North York is the first community hospital in the Metro area

to be equipped with a nuclear cardiology unit, which will handle up to 30 patients a week when fully operational.

"It will mean many heart patients from the area can stay in the area and not have to travel to downtown hospitals for the tests," Shatz said.

Art Walker, chairman of the board of governors at North York General, said the unit would keep the hospital at the forefront of community hospitals in Canada.