

Surgery's shiny new star

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Welcome addition...patient Krista Richardson with Prince of Wales Private Hospital neurosurgeon Ralph Mobbs and the new 3D scanning machine Photo: Jon Reid

TECHNOLOGY that delivers real-time 3D images during surgery will slash operation times and reduce complications for patients, doctors predict.

A new CT imaging scanner - which produces 3D images - at Sydney's Prince of Wales Private Hospital is helpful to doctors performing delicate spinal surgery.

A neurosurgeon at the hospital, Ralph Mobbs, said the new scanner was particularly useful for spinal cancer reconstruction surgery.

"This machine assists during the procedure," he said. "You can navigate your way around the spinal cord, around the nerves of the spine, very accurately and much faster."

Patient Krista Richardson cancelled her planned two weeks of rehab after a delicate back operation that involved use of the machine. She was able to walk without pain almost immediately. "I was actually walking up and down the stairs a couple of days after the surgery," she said. If the 69-year-old from the South Coast had had her surgery for a degenerative disease that caused an S-shape bend in her back a year earlier, she would have faced the prospect of a 15-centimetre scar and longer healing time. "The surgery was amazing. I've got a very small incision, it's only about five centimetres long," she said.

After nine months of pain leading up to the operation she is now pain-free.

"With the previous technique, a lot of the time you wouldn't know the accuracy until halfway through the operation or until after the operation - which is probably not the best time to find out," Dr Mobbs said. So far, three hospitals in Australia have bought the \$400,000 machines.

Meanwhile, at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, a \$6 million bequest has been used to buy a real-time intraoperative MRI scanner that allows surgeons to remove certain types of brain tumour.

A South Eastern Sydney Illawarra Area Health Service spokeswoman said some hospitals were not convinced the 3D component in the new CT scanners made much of a difference. "High-quality, image-guided assistance in intraoperative surgery and imaging does not necessarily require 3D imaging for improved patient outcomes and recovery," she said.

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