ALEXANDRIA - Three cardiologists from the Texas Heart Institute in Houston visited St. Frances Cabrini Hospital Tuesday to view "state of the art" catheterization lab equipment.

Drs. Efrain Garcia, Virendra Mathur and Ali Massumi of St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital-Texas Heart Institute said Cabrini's sophisticated X-ray system to detect heart and arterial problems is one of only a half dozen such systems operating in the United States.

"We have been very impressed with it," Mathur said.

The advanced imaging system, called the General Electric L/U-Cardio system, is designed to help doctors find heart problems as early as possible.

It has a special patient positioning table and a sophisticated dual-arm device so the X-ray tube and image system can be put in any position to get the best pictures of the vascular anatomy.

It also has an additional X-ray tube and image intensifier suspended from the ceiling so views in two planes can be made at the same time. This produces a sort of three-dimensional effect.

The system was installed in Cabrini's catheterization lab in November.

Mathur said St. Luke's has eight cath labs, and each year one is updated.

One of those labs has a system that is just a little bit older version of Cabrini's new system, he said. The room scheduled to be updated this year has older equipment.

General Electric invited the doctors and some other officials from the institute to look at Cabrini's system since they're in the market for a new system.

Mathur said Cabrini's new system is a good one, making the catheterization procedure easier for patient and physician alike.

For the patient, the procedure is over quicker and is less uncomfortable since less dye is used.

For the physician, the machine provides nearly three-dimensional pictures of the vascular anatomy, making his job easier. The pictures the physician sees are also of better quality, Mathur said.

Visiting Cabrini's new lab will be helpful in determining what system to buy for the institute, Mathur said.

"There's nothing like seeing it in operation," Mathur said.