

Southern Vermont Hospitals: Hi tech with a personal touch

The quality and availability of hospital health care in Southern Vermont has come a long way from the country doctor image of not so many years ago. Residents and visitors alike can be assured that in this smallest of states, there exists a level of professionalism that rivals suburban facilities in state-of-the-art equipment and even more importantly, extraordinary personal care.

In an age where early assessment is key in everything from childbirth to joint replacement, area medical centers provide cutting-edge medicine delivered with an individual touch that is frequently lacking in the metropolitan medical behemoths.

The southeast corner of the state is served by Brattleboro Memorial Hospital which has a bed count of 61. This 100-year-old rambling brick compound is constantly improving and expanding the existing complex and indeed, is closing in on a major expansion program that will be in tune with ever changing methods in delivery of medical treatment.

"It's not change for change sake," says BMH spokesperson Barbara Gentry, who admits to an air of excitement in a proposed building project that will primarily serve as an outpatient clinic. "It will be the first major construction in 10 years," she says.

But as far as "now" is considered, Gentry points proudly to recent additions in on-going technological improvements.

A new expanded breast-care program is in line with addressing health issues, not exclusively cancer, through a certified breast health educator. More and more cancer is being diagnosed earlier when it is more manageable.

Good news for women who find the mammogram form of examination uncomfortable, is the addition of a new device, a warmed foam cushion that makes the procedure less difficult to undergo. It is hoped that this type of screening will encourage more women to get mammograms on a regular basis.

In the same department, BMH has also recently acquired a computer-aided

By Linda DuCharme

detection system that helps pinpoint breast cancer at a more treatable stage.

In yet another area where computers are enhancing the array of services offered, the hospital has acquired streamlined exercise equipment that will provide personalized rehab, including a move to make the usually tedious procedures more interesting with the use of computer games.

The future for medicine at BMH, according to Gentry, holds "things we can't imagine." She points to the evolution of certain eye surgeries which used to require the patient to lie prone for two whole days and are now accomplished within a few hours.

Tourists who might require the unexpected use of emergency room care at BMH are often astounded at the level of care and technology that is available.

The staff at B M H reflects the culturally sophisticated community which benefits

"Getting sick far from home is a humbling and scary experience and your only option is to rely on the kindness of strangers."

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from the move toward a better quality of life. It's not uncommon for staffers to have Ivy League diplomas as doctors respond to the appeal of living and working in Vermont.

The Southwestern Vermont Medical Center is located in Bennington and has been around since 1918. Currently, with a medical staff of some 150 doctors and space for 99 beds, the hospital is also in the planning stages of updating and expansion in the near future.

Hospital spokesperson Kevin Robinson points to the constantly improved level of technology as an indicator. Using heart attacks for example, he cites the improvements in emergency room diagnostics. With 99% of suspected heart-attack patients being treated on arrival with a simple aspirin, the subsequent care is swift and focused. Time is precious and lives are saved by knowledgeable and quickly administered measures.

And, indeed, SVMC has been cited for how well it performs in cardiac emergencies. Although there is no heart surgeon on duty and the hospital may not offer the same scope of care, reports show that the care is, on the whole, better than most "big city" hospitals. In a rural area, Robinson emphasizes, the key theme is how good and how quickly health care is delivered.

An ingredient of that care is computer assisted tomography, an X-ray technique that shows many views of a single plane (slice) of an object under examination. With incredible speed it produces a three-dimensional reconstruction view, invaluable in diagnostics. Robinson says the worth of the hospital's data collection and reporting is crucial in terms of measuring quality of care. In reports analyzed by

independent groups SVMC recently measured above average in seven out of nine measures.

When the need for even quicker action is called for, there is a helicopter landing site 25 feet from the emergency room door, says Robinson. This allows for transfers of critical trauma cases to major medical centers in Albany, N.Y., Bay State Medical Center in Massachusetts and Dartmouth in New Hampshire, among others.

About half way between the two larger hospitals of southern Vermont is the smallest hospital in the state, Grace Cottage Hospital in Townshend, with its 19 beds and amazing personal touch.

Hospital spokesperson Al LaRoche describes the somewhat unique facility as a "bread and butter operation" with services ranging from the emergency room to rehab. With six family practice physicians and another to join in February, the hospital provides a particular level of comfort that area residents have come to cherish.

Emergency room visits and lab testing are conveniently located, as is the Messenger Pharmacy, right across the street. Recent additions of personnel include a psychiatric nurse practitioner, a podiatrist, expanded pediatric service and four family nurse practitioners.

If the situation calls for more than Grace Cottage can handle, there are efficient backup operations providing quick transportation by ambulance or helicopter to larger medical centers such as Brattleboro Memorial or Dartmouth, as well as number of other relatively accessible hospitals.

The philosophy of commitment to patient care is expressed by Nurse Practitioner Louise McDevitt, "If you don't know, you find out."

In a recent survey, the tiny white clapboard hospital ranked in top 3 percent in overall patient satisfaction. A recent patient, a New Jersey resident, expressed the Grace Cottage experience most eloquently: "Getting sick far from home is a humbling and scary experience and your only option is to rely on the kindness of strangers."

Southern Vermont hospitals make available the best of all possible worlds in rural medicine. The community minded staff and personnel offer the benefits of personal attention backed up by a partnership of medical technology on the march.

Nowhere is the old adage more illustrative: Bigger is not better.

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