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What's New in Princeton & Central New Jersey?

Reprinted from the January 25, 2012, issue of U.S. 1 Newspaper

St. Peter's Looks to Fill Void Left by UMCP

by Scott Morgan

The University Medical Center at Princeton's upcoming move across Route 1 has generated a healthy debate between those who say its new location at Plainsboro Road will be more convenient to more people and those who feel that a move out of Princeton Borough might as well be a move to Florida.

It also has generated a niche into which St. Peter's University Hospital of New Brunswick has eagerly jumped. Capitalizing on the fact that UMCP will now be five miles farther away from residents of Montgomery and Skillman, St. Peter's has opened its Urgent Care Center in the Village Shopper III shopping center on Route 206 in Skillman, and is promoting the site as an alternative to hospital waiting rooms for patients with non-life-threatening medical issues.

Michael Hochberg, chairman of emergency medicine at Saint Peter's, said that the hospital has been looking to build an urgent care center for "quite a bit of time."

The timing to fill the void left by UMCP's impending move just happened to work out for St. Peter's. The real reason for the expansion is twofold: St. Peter's wanted to expand its brand and its service area, and it wanted to stay competitive with the growing trend of satellite hospital services facilities.

Hochberg, who grew up in the Bronx, earned his bachelor's at Pace University and his M.D. from SUNY-Buffalo, and was an emergency medicine physician at Lawrence Hospital, Jacobi, and Montefiore Medical Centers in New York before moving to UMass Hospital. He also is a national authority on migraines.

This tactic of setting up shop in an area where a long-established hospital traditionally has claimed the market, said John Simone, president of Simone Realty in Lawrenceville, is an increasingly common strategy among hospitals.

The healthcare game, Simone said, is a lot like retail. Competition is fierce, new markets open up all the time, and market conditions are driven by the same desire to reach shifting, settling, and growing populations.

And as hospitals move to meet new population densities and create new market shares for themselves, they also create pockets of opportunity for competitors eager to fill niches. Like retail chains, hospital systems are setting up non-life threatening care sites where populations and logistics add up to golden opportunity.

It is no different from Home Depot, which has outlets in Hamilton, East Windsor, Ewing, and West Windsor, Simone said. Multiple locations just make it more convenient for shoppers, whether they're looking for lumber or surgery.

"The hospital business has certainly become a business," Hochberg said. "We're all vying for various patients, and the lifeblood of any hospital is to provide services for patients."

In the past 10 years Hochberg has seen business in emergency rooms skyrocket, particularly where there is an increase in the number of people covered by health insurance.

Before joining St. Peter's, Hochberg was the director of emergency services at University of Massachusetts Hospital. When the commonwealth revamped its healthcare system a few years ago, more people were covered by insurance benefits. The more people covered by insurance benefits, the more they turned to the ER for medical treatment, but often not for actual emergencies.

But the issue of ER overcrowding, Hochberg said, is not simply a function of more people having health insurance. It largely is a function of overworked primary care physicians who keep bankers' hours; and when a broken arm happens after 5 p.m. on a Friday, the only place left to go has been the emergency room.

"We don't turn anybody away, we treat everybody," Hochberg said of St. Peter's' emergency room in New Brunswick. But the ripple effect is that ER staffs become overwhelmed by sheer volume of patients — and those unfortunate few who have painful injuries that do not threaten their lives often are consigned to hours-long waits before they get care in busy ERs.

Hochberg foresees no slowing of patients to emergency rooms as new federal healthcare

reform sets in over the next few years. But this, he said, is a prime chance for hospital systems to expand services through satellite urgent care facilities.

Urgent care centers such as the one St. Peter's opened at the beginning of January siphon off non-emergency calls that clog ER waiting rooms in hospitals all over the country, Hochberg said. Such centers treat things like sore throats, broken bones, lacerations, and bruises that are too involved for general primary care doctors, but are not emergencies like heart attacks, strokes, or miscarriages.

St. Peter's Urgent Care is staffed by a board certified physician able to treat everything from sore throats to injuries requiring X-rays and lab work (facilities for which are on-site). There also is always a lab tech, an X-ray tech, a nurse, and a day manager on duty during operating hours (Monday to Friday, 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. and from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Saturdays, Sundays and holidays. No appointments are necessary.) The staff also is qualified to judge whether someone needs a real ER, and will send true emergencies to New Brunswick.

Though only open for a short time, St. Peter's Urgent Care has seen more volume than anyone expected, Hochberg said. Patients unwilling to wait in crowded ERs and, just as importantly, unwilling to travel any farther than they have to, have proven encouraging to St. Peter's.

This is the hospital's first urgent care center, and while Hochberg did not say whether St. Peter's is looking to build more, he said "We expect to be successful here and we expect to be successful in the future."

Simone Realty, which specializes in medical parks, has helped Capital Health System expand its brand right in the backyard of Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital. Simone says that Capital Health's facilities on Quakerbridge Road and Whitehorse-Mercerville Road, each in the shadow of RWJ-Hamilton, have become major successes by luring those in need of outpatient services with convenient locations and hours.

Capital Health's move to Hamilton predates its move from Trenton to Hopewell, where the organization's 1 million-square-foot facility just opened in November. But, says Simone, Princeton Healthcare has returned the favor by setting up its own satellite non-ER facility on Federal City Road, in the shadow of Capital Health's new suburban setting.

Simone says he is not aware of any other hospital system, particularly one from outside the Princeton region (such as Virtua of southern New Jersey or St. Barnabas of Livingston), planning to fill in any gaps left by Capital Health's or UMCP's move.

He is, however, working with at least one area hospital system regarding the northern Burlington County area. "People are moving out of Mercer County," Simone says. And where they are setting up is Bordentown, Mansfield, and Pemberton. As the population in this part of the state grows, so do opportunities for area hospitals to set up outpatient and emergency care services.

Saint Peter's Urgent Care Center, 1378 Route 206, Skillman; 609-497-4597. Michael Hochberg, chairman of emergency medicine www.saintpetershcs.com/urgentcare.

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