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Heart center designed to keep people out of ER

By: **Kris B. Mamula**

Heritage Valley Health System's acute heart care services at an outpatient center in Beaver is the first of its kind in western Pennsylvania and part of a bigger effort to improve patient access to care while restraining health care costs.

In just a few months, the new service treats 10 to 12 patients a day, half of HVHS's goal of 15 to 20, said Dr. Richard Begg, an interventional cardiologist at Heritage Valley Heart & Vascular Center. Care at the Acute Cardiac Care Center is designed for HVHS patients with chronic health problems to help them avoid a costly and disruptive hospital emergency room admission.

"It has grown much more rapidly than I anticipated," Begg said. "Our emergency room doctors have really embraced this. The key to this whole thing is patient access to get the care they need." Hospitals are facing unprecedented changes as commercial and government reimbursement shrinks. HVHS has cut costs while promoting new, more convenient and lower cost ways of reaching patients.

In addition to the two hospitals it operates in Sewickley and Beaver, HVHS has a rapidly expanding outpatient network. In recent years, the hospital network has opened urgent care and walk-in clinics, which expand patient access.

The new cardiac service line is not intended for critical medical problems, such as heart attack, when immediate emergency care is needed. Instead, the service would be more convenient and cost less for a patient with symptoms of gradually worsening congestive heart failure. Home health workers are among the providers who can make referrals for the care.

"A significant number of these patients can be cared for in a more comfortable, cost-efficient manner that is safer for them," Begg said.

These centers will also help curb avoidable hospital readmissions by arranging follow-up appointments with patients recently discharged from the hospital, said Dr. Dan Brooks, vice president for community health at HVHS.

“It’s all part of our strategy to build a stronger and deeper ambulatory care options for patients,” he said. “We’re decentralizing our care into the community. Many of these patients have chronic health problems. Instead of having to wait, they could come in that day.”

Hospitals nationwide have been adapting services to cope with reimbursement changes and better meet the needs of the patient, said **Jewish Healthcare Foundation** Chief Medical Officer Keith Kanel. Many people with chronic medical problems are admitted to the hospital if they go to the emergency room, even though many of their problems could be handled safely without an admission, he said.

“Creating a way for people not to have to come into the emergency department is a good thing,” Kanel said. “What it comes down to is creating access. It’s a credit to Heritage Valley to integrate their service line with more alternatives, more choice, more access.”

Lowering health care costs is a metric that doctors have to meet to receive quality care incentive payments from health insurer Highmark’s Accountable Care Alliance, the richest offered by an insurer. But Begg said the big issue is making it easier for people to get medical care.

“I’m a big believer in access to care,” Begg said. “That’s sacred.”

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