

New home for Wound Care Center at Laurel Regional Hospital

Open house planned for Jan. 13 at outpatient facility on Van Dusen Road

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(Enlarge) During the ribbon cutting ceremony to mark the opening of Laurel Regional Hospital's new Wound Care Center Jan. 3, certified hyperbaric technician Karim El Alaoui (right) demonstrates the center's hyperbaric chamber with the help of Wound Care Center director Caryn Vollmer, as visitors look on. (Staff photo by Nicole Martyn)

Laurel Regional Hospital's Wound Care Center, where nearly 300 patients come each month for treatment of chronic and nonhealing wounds, has a new home with advanced equipment unveiled by hospital officials this week.

On Monday, a ribbon cutting was held for the new and expanded Wound Care Center, located at 7400 Van Dusen Road in a renovated stand-alone building that was formerly used by the hospital for its Magnetic Resonance Imaging, or MRI, unit.

Hospital officials have operated a Wound Care Center -- with six specialized physicians, three nurses and administrators -- in-house for 15 years but the new facility across the street has additional staff, treatment rooms and more high-tech equipment.

"We only had three treatment rooms at the hospital's Wound Care Center, but in the new building, we have five treatment rooms and two hyperbaric chambers in one room," said Caryn Vollmer, the center's program director.

With the additional space, the center's six vascular and plastic surgery surgeons will be able to see more patients; and the hyperbaric chambers, where patients will receive pure oxygen to speed up the healing of their wounds, will allow them to provide a more advanced treatment option for those who qualify for the procedure.

Having the two elongated, acrylic-encased, tubular-shaped hyperbaric chambers on hand is the biggest change for treatment at the Wound Care Center, a change which has officials at the facility excited.

"We had a superb wound center and program, but one thing we didn't have is hyperbaric medicine. So, we had to send our patients out if they needed these oxygen treatments," said Dr. Rene Gelber, the center's medical director. "By adding the hyperbaric chambers, there's a lot more we can do and we are now a medical center facility, which means there's nothing that the University of Maryland, Georgetown or Johns Hopkins can do that we can't do."

Hyperbaric oxygen chambers have been in the news in stories about the late singer Michael Jackson using the chambers to promote a youthful look or how athletes use them to help strained muscles heal faster. Whether the chambers are effective for those uses is debatable. But at the hospital's wound center, the chambers will be used only on specific types of wounds that medical research has shown they can be used to treat effectively.

"Ten or so types of wounds have been approved for us to treat in the chambers, such as lower extremity diabetic ulcers and patients with radiation tissue damage. The oxygen stimulates the tissues and helps the wounds heal quicker," Vollmer said. "Also, if someone comes in the hospital's emergency room with carbon monoxide poisoning, they could be brought over here for treatment."

Additionally, center officials said hyperbaric therapy helps reduce swelling, fight infection and build new blood vessels. They estimate that 10 to 20 percent of their patients will benefit from the hyperbaric chamber treatments, with most of them being diabetics.

"Ankle and foot ulcers of diabetics are the most common uses for hyperbaric chambers, and varying degrees of vein blockages caused in patients with arterial circulation impairment," Gelber said. "The benefit of the oxygen is that a large amount of it gets in a patient's circulation, and it has a therapeutic effect long after the patient is no longer in the chamber and promotes healing."

Karim El Alaoui, the center's certified hyperbaric technician and safety director, had an administrator stretch out on a comfortable-looking gurney, which El Alaoui aligned and attached to the hyperbaric chamber's rails before pushing a button to cause the gurney to slide into the wide, pressurized oxygen chamber.

"We check each patient's temperature, blood pressure and everything to make sure their vitals are OK," El Alaoui said. "We always ask them if they're comfortable before we close and lock the

(chamber's) door and have several buttons to decide how fast to compress and decompress them. We simulate a scuba diving experience as if the person was 30 feet to 50 feet in the water."

Because most patients are in the chamber for at least two hours, five days a week, for an average of six weeks; an adjustable flat screen television hangs overhead so patients can watch DVDs or cable television during treatments.

"Some watch television and some go to sleep," El Alaoui said. "But I'm always here the entire time whenever a patient is in the chamber -- no breaks."

Hospital officials say every 30 seconds a diabetic somewhere in the nation loses a lower limb to amputation. According to the National Diabetes Association, 25 percent of diabetics develop foot ulcers that can lead to amputations if not aggressively and properly treated. Center officials hope the new equipment will lead to fewer patients having their limbs amputated and speedier healing.

"More than 90 percent of the patients who come in heal out, and our satisfaction rate is above 90 percent, too. A lot of our patients' wounds flare up again, and they keep coming back," Vollmer said.

Although he has not been treated in the hyperbaric chambers, Lyndon Vermillion, of Seabrook, has been returning to Laurel Regional Hospital's wound center since 1997 for treatments of blood clots that damaged his legs.

"I have ulcers on both ankles and my shoes rub against them, causing them to flare up," Vermillion said following a treatment session on the first day the center was open. "They'll heal and it will happen again, and I have to come back. I was away for two years, but they broke open again in November, so I'm back and making progress."

When asked about the center's new digs, Vermillion described the new building as "nice," with one thing missing.

"At the hospital, we used to be able to look out the (wound center's) windows from the fifth floor and enjoy the sun, which was a nice diversion," he said. "They don't have windows here. I told them to put up some more art, but I like what I've seen and it's nice."

Laurel Regional Hospital's Wound Care Center is managed by Jacksonville, Fla.-based Diversified Clinical Services, which runs more than 300 such facilities nationwide and in Puerto Rico. The Laurel wound center operates as an outpatient facility weekdays and will hold an open house for the public to see the new facility Jan. 13, from 4:30 to 7 p.m.