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New hospital much busier than expected

Network of clinics, WilCo population boom bring in waves of patients

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Nearly one year after Scott & White's University Medical Campus in Round Rock opened, hospital executives are adding physicians to Scott & White's clinics, building extra space in the hospital and revising projections after patient visits and procedures far exceeded anticipated numbers.

Ernie Bovio, CEO of Scott & White's UMC, says while the number of in-patient admissions for the year -- 2,406 -- has been consistent with projections, the hospital is surprised by growth in four areas:

- Surgeries, projected to number 1,800, have reached 2,907 to date.
- Baby deliveries, projected at 130 per month, are more than 300 per month.
- Diagnostic imaging, projected at 1,500 per month, are 4,000 per month.
- Emergency department visits, projected to be 7,000 for the first year, number 16,245 so far.

The hospital's design includes space for more labor, delivery and recovery suites, and Bovio says those extra four suites are being designed to accommodate the higher-than-expected number of deliveries.

"It's been a phenomenal year," Bovio says. "We'll be in constant expansion mode and growth mode. This time next year we'll be talking about planning our new patient tower."

Scott & White will increase its physician staff by 20 percent this summer, adding 16 new physicians to its Williamson and Travis County clinics, says Jim Thompson, associate executive director for clinics.

One of three new Williamson County hospitals to open in 2007 and 2008, Scott & White's UMC has a built-in advantage from its existing clinics in Williamson County and its physician network, Bovio says. It had nearly 20 primary care physicians with busy practices sending patients to Scott & White's flagship hospital in Temple and to others in Austin, but after the new hospital opened they could send patients there.

"When we opened the doors [to UMC], we flipped a switch," Bovio says. "We're not like other hospitals, which are recruiting new physicians who are building their practices from scratch. That can take years."

Growth among Scott & White's Central Texas clinics has also been surprisingly quick, Thompson says. While part of the reason is population growth in the area, Scott & White's decision in early 2006 to become a participating provider for major insurance companies also brought more patients into its clinics in Central Texas, he says. Before 2006, Scott & White was principally a provider for its own health plan.

Williamson County's other two new hospitals have also reported higher-than-projected numbers in emergency visits. The Seton Family of Hospitals' Seton Center Williamson opened in February this year, and Cedar Park Regional Medical Center, a joint venture between Seton and Community Health Systems, opened in December.

Cedar Park Medical Center reports 10,000 emergency department visits so far, three times the number projected for this point in the year, Marketing Director Liz Nolan says. The hospital has seen roughly 1,500 in-patient admissions and 750 surgeries so far, both on par with projections.

Seton Center Williamson does not have numbers available, but CEO Mark Hazelwood says the number of patients with acute needs has been higher than projected. While deliveries have been slower for that hospital, Seton's emphasis on complex care throughout its system has meant the number of cardiac procedures and diagnostics performed in its Williamson hospital have exceeded projections.

Hazelwood and Nolan say three hospitals recruiting physicians has been a challenge. At the same time, Nolan says, the Cedar Park area has seen physicians moving to the area in response to a growing population and those physicians have worked with the new hospital.

In Round Rock, Hazelwood says Seton Center Williamson is planning residency programs for students in UT Southwestern's medical program if the UT System decides to move forward with more academic medical training in the area. The hospital is also working with Texas A&M medical students as they start rotations in Round Rock hospitals.

Courtesy of JB Goodwin