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New hospitals fill a health care gap

What do you do when someone you love has to leave the hospital but is too sick to go home?

What happens when it's time for your elderly mother to leave Saint Al's, St. Luke's or one of Canyon County's two general hospitals, but she isn't well enough to go home? You tick off the possibilities: Assisted living? A nursing home? A rehabilitation hospital?

If Mom is too sick for any of those, there hasn't been a suitable place in the Treasure Valley to send her until now. The new option is called a long-term acute-care hospital. Boise and Meridian have one each. They serve all of southern Idaho, eastern Oregon and parts of Nevada. The hospitals - which accept Medicare, Medicaid and private-pay patients -fill a niche in local health care, said Petra Thorseth, director of clinical resource management at Saint Alphonsus Regional Medical Center in Boise.

Patients at the new hospitals typically continue to need help breathing or require other care too complicated for nursing homes. The average patient stay is 25 to 30 days.

"This has been an issue for at least the past 10 years," said Thorseth, whose duties include overseeing patients' discharge from Saint Al's. "We were trying to find facilities, sometimes outside the state. Or families stepped up to the plate and learned to care for their family member at home."

But that solution doesn't work for everyone. Families with two working people often can't afford to lose income while one stays home with an aging, ill parent. Some families can't handle caring for a sick parent and growing children at the same time.

The new hospitals are Southwest Idaho Advanced Care Hospital, a 40-bed hospital at 6651 W. Franklin Road near Boise Towne Square mall, and Complex Care Hospital of Idaho, a 60-bed hospital at 2131 S. Bonito Way, Meridian, near the corner of Eagle and Overland roads.

"This helps fill a gap for patients that require intensive care, nursing respiratory care and daily physician attendance," said Gil Silbernagel, CEO of Southwest Idaho Advanced Care Hospital.

The new hospitals serve all ages, but typically get elderly patients who have run through their Medicare benefits for single visits at the general hospitals, but remain so sick they continue to need intensive or critical care. The long-term acute-care hospitals save the Medicare program money compared with repeatedly readmitting the patients to general hospitals. Care costs \$700 to nearly \$3,000 a day, depending on the patient, Complex Care CEO David Tupper said.

Staffing and services at the new hospitals are similar to intensive care at the general hospitals.

Mary Kaye Brown, 63, of Emmett turned to Complex Care Hospital for her husband, Alan Brown, 67, who suffered a blood infection and other troubles. He was still ill after his stay at Saint Al's was up.

"It wasn't that he was a little sick," she said. "He was very, very ill and could go either way at that point."

Alan Brown went home Tuesday. "He's walking with a walker," he wife said. "He's able to take care of many of his own needs."

Both the new long-term acute care hospitals are part of for-profit chains. Ernest Health Inc., based in New Mexico, owns and operates Southwest Idaho Advanced Care Hospital and similar facilities in at least eight other states. LifeCare, based in Texas, runs Complex Care Hospital of Idaho. It has 20 locations in 10 states.

Southwest Idaho Advanced Care opened in February, Complex Care in April. The Complex Care Hospital had been in the planning stages for several years, Tupper said. Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, where LifeCare has facilities, delayed work in Idaho.

The Valley's population grew enough to support the niche facilities, Silbernagel said. Both hospitals so far have four to eight patients at a time. Medicare requires the hospitals to severely limit the number of patients for about six months before they open all their beds.

The demand is huge, Tupper said. "We've been open two months now, and we've had 100 referrals."

Tupper expects his hospital to care for 1,000 patients in 2009.

At Complex Care Hospital, about half of patients go home when they leave and about half go to assisted living facilities, a rehabilitation hospital or varied types of nursing homes.