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Heart patients will be able to get stents at St. Joe's

St. Joseph Regional Medical Center in Lewiston will implant stents in cardiac patients starting Jan. 3.

Currently, the Spokane area is the nearest place patients can go for the procedure that clears blockages in the arteries of the heart, said Dr. Jay Hunter, an emergency room doctor at St. Joe's.

The move is the next step in cardiac care for St. Joe's, which has offered diagnostic cardiac catheterization for about five years, a test that determines if a blockage exists.

Many patients, however, still went to Spokane, where a stent could be placed during the catheterization if the test indicated it was needed, said Perrin Peacock, chief executive officer of CardioSolution in Columbus, Ohio. St. Joe's has hired his firm to provide the physicians who will perform the new service.

The decision of the Lewiston hospital raises questions about safety because St. Joe's has no open-heart surgeon to intervene if something goes wrong, said Dr. Lee Gould, a Lewiston cardiologist, who stands to lose business because of the change.

"I'm concerned about patient safety," Gould said. "They may say otherwise. It has been demonstrated time and again larger centers do a better job with this kind of thing."

Patients can be transported by helicopter to Spokane, where heart surgeons are available, in about one hour and 45 minutes in a best-case scenario when the weather is good, said Hunter, who has worked at St. Joe's for 31 years.

Hunter, however, believes the availability of stent implantation at St. Joe's will save lives.

Implanting stents within 90 minutes of arriving at the hospital is the best treatment for patients suffering heart attacks in the vast majority of cases, Hunter said.

Right now St. Joe's gives those patients clot-busting drugs and then transfers them to Spokane as quickly as possible, Hunter said.

The biggest variable in patient success is the skill level of the physician, not the place where stent implantation is done or the availability of a heart surgeon, said Bob Jones, director of radiology at St. Joe's. "If we did not think we could do this safely, we wouldn't be doing it. Patient safety is our priority."

The American College of Cardiology recommends that in instances where heart surgeons aren't available that stents be done by physicians with complication rates and outcomes equivalent or superior to national benchmarks.

Presently it's exceedingly difficult to determine if individual doctors meet that criteria, because the statistics are generally tracked by laboratories, not physicians, said Dr. Lou Vadlamani, chief medical officer of CardioSolution. "Every doctor CardioSolution is sending to Lewiston has done at least 1,000 stent implantations. We only hire the rock stars of interventional cardiology."

Vadlamani's firm will give St. Joe's 24 hour, seven-day-a-week coverage. Two cardiologists will work rotating shifts of seven days in a row and then be off for seven days, Peacock said.

Vadlamani will provide oversight and take some cases while a fourth cardiologist will be an alternate.

St. Joe's is the second customer of CardioSolution, which also serves a hospital in Aberdeen, S.D., Peacock said.

CardioSolution was the only practice that gave a complete response to a request for proposal from St. Joe's that also went to the two largest cardiology practices in Spokane as well as two Boise hospitals, Jones said of the selection process.

The only fatalities in three years in Aberdeen involved extraordinarily serious cases where the patients had little chance of survival in the absence of intervention, Vadlamani said.

Open-heart surgeons are farther from Aberdeen than they are Lewiston, Vadlamani said.

In addition to improving patient care, St. Joe's expects to see its revenue increase. The hospital anticipates the number of cardiac catheterizations it does will climb from 75 annually to 350 by the second year of the program with 125 stent implantations.

That increase is expected to generate about \$500,000 in yearly net revenue, said Tim Sayler, St. Joe's chief executive officer.

St. Joe's is paying CardioSolution a flat monthly fee of an undisclosed amount that's about equal to what it would pay to hire one to two cardiologists, Sayler said.

The hospital had \$3 million in revenue after expenses in its most recent fiscal year, Sayler said. "We do believe this will be a profitable service line."