COEUR d'ALENE - If Kootenai Health patients suddenly feel like they're getting Mayo Clinic-quality care, there's a good reason. It's because they are. In a press conference Tuesday, Kootenai Health officials announced that the hospital is now one of just 30 national affiliates of the prestigious Mayo Clinic Care Network. That relationship does more than put a brighter shine on Kootenai Health's reputation.

"Kootenai Health will continue to be a locally owned community hospital; we're proud of that designation," said hospital CEO Jon Ness. "The purpose of this new arrangement is so we can provide advanced medical information and technology for our medical staff to allow patients to stay closer to home for health care at a lower cost.

"We're honored to be their clinical partner and collaborator going forward."

David Hayes, medical director for Mayo Clinic Care Network, and Paul Anderson, chairman of the board of the Kootenai Hospital District, mingle following a presentation to announce Kootenai Health as a member of the Mayo Clinic Care Network Tuesday at the Kootenai Health Resource Center in Coeur d'Alene. The hospital is the first in the state and 30th overall to be added to the network since 2011.

Kootenai Health became not just the first Mayo affiliate in Idaho, but the first in the Pacific Northwest.

What that means to Kootenai Health patients is access through their doctors to some of the best medical minds in the nation. Kootenai Health physicians can consult electronically in several different ways with Mayo Clinic doctors on disease management, care guidelines, treatment recommendations and reference materials. Mayo doctors can further consult internally before sharing their recommendations with Kootenai Health physicians.

As Ness put it, "Your local physician is (still) primary, but your local physician just picked up 4,000 colleagues."

According to Dr. David Hayes, medical director for Mayo Clinic Care Network, Kootenai Health and Mayo are both committed to patient-centered care, which is why they've already worked together on a limited basis over the years. As of Tuesday, that mutual commitment became magnified.

"We have been on this journey for a while now and are really excited that Kootenai Health is the newest member of the Mayo Clinic Care Network," Hayes said.

Hayes said the relationship "fosters physician collaboration. We think that the way to the best patient care is by integration and physicians working together."
Hayes said the many changes going on now in the health care industry "fragment care," but that through the network, physicians and organizations both get to know each other much better - and that pays off for the patients.

He lauded Kootenai Health's medical staff and organization but acknowledged that sometimes, physicians and patients want more information, perhaps other opinions.

"This is a way to do that and keep the patient locally," Hayes said. "We think it's all about providing the best care for the patient ... and keep people at home so they don't have to travel. We think that's better for everybody."

Hayes said Kootenai Health was chosen after a rigorous due diligence process, in part because the two organizations are culturally similar.

"The patients are the center of everything," he said. "Our mantra internally is that the needs of the patient always come first, and I think we truly live that."

Common denominators of all 30 affiliates, he said, are high quality and the fact that they are all patient-centric organizations, but there's something more.

"There's a certain amount of chemistry," he said. "We have many, many conversations, but there is usually in the first conversation or two a watershed moment where both groups say, 'There is chemistry here or there is not.'"

With Kootenai, a phone call with Ness started the selection process, Hayes said. In January, a Mayo team visited.

"We go through an extremely deep due diligence process, but I can tell you that, as somebody who's now done this for awhile, you walk into an organization and you get a sense of leadership and what the mission is for the organization," Hayes said.

Kootenai Health's attainment of Magnet status, the top national honor for nursing excellence, also helped, Hayes said.

The new partnership puts two powerhouses, one local and one national, on the same team. According to the most recent ratings by U.S. News & World Report, Kootenai Health is the best hospital in Idaho, tied with St. Luke's Regional Medical Center in Boise. At the same time, the Mayo Clinic, based in Rochester, Minn., is rated the No. 1 hospital in the U.S.

Kootenai Health outranked 50 other Idaho hospitals. Mayo was rated tops among nearly 5,000 medical centers across the country, according to U.S. News & World Report.

Paul Anderson, a member of the Kootenai Health board of directors for 17 years and its current chairman, said the hospital's focus has always been on providing excellent patient care.

"What we think about this collaborative relationship with Mayo is that our physicians are going to have the opportunity to work with the Mayo physicians and come up with better solutions to help our patients, and truly, our patients are going to be the beneficiaries of this relationship," he said. "That's what it's all about.

"The people of Kootenai County own this facility. We work for them, and we want to provide absolutely the best quality of care possible."
Steve Griffitts, a member of the hospital foundation's board, and president of Jobs Plus, Inc. - the region's economic development agency - said the Mayo affiliation goes beyond providing outstanding medical care. "Health care excellence is vital to a community's ability to attract and retain great companies," Griffitts said. "This partnership further strengthens our position as an outstanding area for companies to consider."

Hayes said the Mayo relationship with Kootenai Health is exclusive for this area. No Spokane-area hospitals will become Mayo network affiliates, he said.

Ness said the hospital will pay a "reasonable" fee to Mayo for its services, but that Kootenai Health physicians and patients won't be charged a penny of it. In the long run, he added, the fee is insignificant. "It's immaterial compared to the quality of care that will result from this for our patients," he said.

Ness said further benefits are expected. "The combination of Mayo Clinic's name and reputation in the United States, with Kootenai Health in our local market, we believe will ultimately help us recruit hard-to-recruit physicians in different specialties, possibly new members of our leadership team, possibly new employees in the organization, so ... we think this overall relationship is going to help advance Kootenai Health not just from a patient care standpoint, but from a regional reputation standpoint."

Growing pains don't have to hurt. After Tuesday's press conference, Kootenai Health CEO Jon Ness spoke about the hospital's growth and the Mayo partnership's potential impact on future growth. He said the hospital's total delivery of all services has increased 10 to 15 percent annually for the past three years, and that trend is likely to continue or even accelerate.

"That's one of the reasons we're doing the building expansion," he said of the $57 million first phase of construction going on right now. He added, however, the expansion would have gone on even without the expected boost from Mayo.

Dan Klocko, the hospital's vice president for human resources, said Kootenai Health now employs 2,525 people. He said each of the past five years, the hospital has added, on average, 75 to 100 employees. Klocko said the average pay is $48,000, not including a strong benefits package. He said further hiring is expected.

"So we've got a parking problem," Ness quipped.

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• Top 5 Idaho hospitals

1. Kootenai Health
1. (tie) St. Luke's Regional Medical Center (Boise)
3. St. Alphonsus Regional Medical Center (Boise)
4. Portneuf Medical Center (Pocatello)
4. (tie) St. Alphonsus Medical Center (Nampa)

• Top 5 U.S. hospitals

1. Mayo Clinic (Rochester, Minn.)
2. Massachusetts General Hospital (Boston)
3. Johns Hopkins Hospital (Baltimore)
4. Cleveland Clinic
5. UCLA Medical Center (Los Angeles)