

More patients taking to the air

Helicopter transfers to SJRMC have picked up, CEO says, and that's saving time and lives

The skies over Lewiston's Normal Hill are getting a little busier.

Helicopters are bringing more patients to St. Joseph Regional Medical Center in Lewiston from hospitals at places like Orofino, Grangeville and Cottonwood, said hospital CEO Blain Claypool.

The Tribune asked Claypool about the overhead traffic after an alert reader noticed the volume of helicopters landing at St. Joe's had increased.

The number of patients being transferred to St. Joe's from area hospitals has doubled since last year to about 100 per month, Claypool said. It's a practice that improves care for patients, he added.

The best case for a patient suffering from a heart attack or a stroke is for the blocked vessel to be open within 90 minutes of arriving at the hospital, Claypool said, noting St. Joe's average is 57 minutes. Plus, St. Joe's is the only hospital in the region with a catheterization laboratory and specialist to do the procedures.

The helicopter ride from Orofino or the Grangeville area is roughly 30 minutes faster than going to Spokane or Coeur d'Alene, getting potentially life-saving care to people faster, Claypool said.

Having patients cared for closer to home has the extra benefit of saving money on gas and hotels for families, Claypool added.

"They shouldn't have to travel at a time when their family member is in great need," he said.

Keeping patients in the region is part of a deliberate strategy at St. Joe's since it became a private business in May of 2017 as part of RCCH HealthCare Partners. Every other week, Claypool drives somewhere in the region, stopping in places like Colfax, Grangeville and Pomeroy. He meets with physicians, other health care providers and administrators, listening to what they need and sharing what St. Joe's offers.

"We're establishing ourselves as the backstop, as that regional medical center," Claypool said.

Hospital officials in Orofino, Cottonwood and Grangeville said they work with the Lewiston hospital.

At Clearwater Valley Hospital in Orofino and St. Mary's Hospital in Cottonwood most patients are transferred to St. Joe's, said Ashley Steinbruecker, a spokeswoman for the hospitals.

The exceptions include those who need complex trauma care, infectious disease consultations and certain types of pediatric treatments, Steinbruecker said.

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Page 2 of 2

Syringa Hospital in Grangeville also has noticed St. Joe's efforts. "We are encouraged that (St. Joe's) is responding to patient transfer requests in a more timely manner, whether accepting or declining," Syringa CEO Abner King said in an email.

"Patient outcomes improve significantly when the patient is sent to the correct higher level of care the first time and not bounced from hospital to hospital," King said.

As volumes grow, St. Joe's has made changes in its facilities to accommodate more patients.

In at least one instance, it has converted office space that was once patient rooms back to its original use.

"We are not transferring (patients) out based on capacity at all," Claypool said.

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