

2025

PROGRESS

EDITION 3

Health Care



WVU MEDICINE



An artist's rendering of the future of the WVU Medicine campus, including the new eye institute to be constructed, center.

Construction starts for WVU Eye Institute

BY DAVID BEARD

DBeard@DominionPost.com

MORGANTOWN — Behind a tall wire fence at the intersection of Van Voorhis Road and Elmer Prince Drive, construction workers are prepping the ground for the construction of the WVU Eye Institute.

The WVU Health System Board of Directors approved \$233.5 million in funding in April 2024.

The current Eye Institute, next to the Physician Office Center, has 60 exam rooms and 13 testing rooms. The new 150,000-square-foot building, at the intersection of Van Voorhis Road and Elmer Prince Drive (where WVU Police now sits) will have 102 exam rooms and 44 testing rooms plus surgical suites.

The four-story institute will be connected by a two-level bridge to a new, dedicated multi-level parking garage for patients and staff, with more than 1,100 spaces. During the January construction kickoff, WVU said they hope to open the new building in about 30 months.

Thomas Mauger, executive chair of WVU Eye Institute, reported in January that the institute has outgrown its current building.

They don't have enough room to hire more doctors to take care of patients. And new ophthalmologists are reluctant to enter individual private practice.

With its new building the institute can see patients here and support ophthalmologists at other

sites across the state.

West Virginia has only 50% of the ophthalmologists it needs, he said, and in 10 years it will be only 25%. "So I have a sense of urgency that we really need to get this done."

In April 2024, Mauger noted that the institute is the only provider in the state and in the neighboring regions in Maryland, Ohio, and Pennsylvania for most of the conditions it treats.

The size and scale of the new facility will enable his team to be able to respond better to the brisk demand for the specialized services of the Eye Institute.

And it will allow for the expansion of clinical research into new treatments for the diseases and conditions that most affect the people of the state

and region.

The new Eye Institute will make room for the planned Hazel Ruby McQuain Comprehensive Cancer Hospital. In April 2024, the Hazel Ruby McQuain Charitable Trust announced a \$50 million gift to launch that \$500 million project. It will go up on the site of the current Eye Institute, which will be razed.

The hospital — part of the WVU Cancer Institute — will have its own entrance, cafeteria, clinics, infusion center, operating rooms, inpatient rooms and imaging suites.

The project will take time, WVU Health System President and CEO Albert Wright said in April 2024. Over the next three to five years, comprehensive plans and designs will emerge. They will hold a

fundraising campaign to build on the \$50 million gift and they hope more will get involved and give to help move toward that estimated \$500 million goal.

The Cancer Hospital will be a foundational element of the WVU Cancer Institute as it pursues National Cancer Institute designation, the gold standard for cancer institutes, WVU said. The National Cancer Institute leads cancer research across the country and recognizes cancer centers with an official NCI designation, the highest federal rating a cancer center can achieve. This designation is awarded to cancer centers that are leading in innovative research and treatments and is the gold standard for cancer programs.

Currently, there are 72

NCI-designated cancer centers in 36 U.S. states, and centers with this designation represent the top 2 percent of cancer centers in the country. The WVU Cancer Institute would be the first NCI-designated cancer center in West Virginia.

In 2023, the state Legislature allocated \$50 million for WVUHS to pursue the designation, and as of November 2024, it had spent about \$2 million. Wright said in November that the journey would take five to seven years and cost \$300 to \$400 million.

The WVU Cancer Institute could become the 73rd NCI-designated cancer center, and 75% of all cancer funding goes to those hospitals. And it would grant the institute access to cutting edge clinical trials.

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An artist's rendering of a street level view of the planned WVU Eye Institute building.



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To learn more, visit WVUMedicine.org/Rankings



In January, Vandalia Health received \$5 million in state funds to put toward construction of a new Vandalia Health Neuroscience Institute.

EXPANSION

Vandalia Health grows with several projects throughout the Mountain State



Vandalia Health is investing \$150 million to expand the capacity at Teays Valley Hospital.

Creation of a new Neuroscience Institute is at the top of the list

BY DAVID BEARD

DBeard@DominionPost.com

MORGANTOWN — Vandalia Health is growing not just in the greater Morgantown area, but all across its footprint.

David Goldberg, president and CEO of Mon Health System and Davis Health System – Vandalia Health Northern Region and executive vice president of Vandalia Health, talked about some of the projects.

Vandalia is making a \$150 million investment at CAMC Teays Valley and has held the groundbreaking to expand its surgical and inpatient capacity and parking.

The expansion will include hospital operating rooms, the emergency room and patient beds, Vandalia said.

Work is under way at CAMC Greenbrier Valley Medical Center for a new medical office building, funded by federal and state money.

CAMC in Charleston currently partners with Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation to provide inpatient service in the hospital.

Now, they will partner to design and build a new 50-bed rehabilitation hospital on the old Boll Medical property, which will be connected to the general hospital by a walkway across Washington Street.

Mary Free Bed is a non-profit that works with more than 50 hospitals for rehab services.

Vandalia North patients, Goldberg noted, have access to a rehab hospital with Encompass. This project will give southern patients access to a rehab facility. CAMC said current employees of its rehabilitation program will remain CAMC employees, while Mary Free Bed will provide the management team.

In January, Vandalia Health received \$5 million in state funds to put toward construction of a new Vandalia Health Neuroscience Institute. Vandalia said the institute will be located in Charleston on Morris Street, directly across from the main entrance

at CAMC General Hospital. It is expected to be about 30,000 square feet.

Goldberg said federal funds and Vandalia funds will also go into the project.

The institute will offer advanced diagnostics, cutting-edge treatments and expanded residency programs under one roof.

And Mon Health Stonewall Jackson Memorial Hospital will soon get a CT angiography (CTA) machine to do CT scans of the heart. Goldberg said this service is already available at Mon Health, CAMC and Davis Medical Center; now Stonewall patients will have access to the service.

Goldberg offered some thoughts on Mon Health's and Vandalia's growth. Mon Health grew its provider staff – physicians and nurse practitioners – by 90 in 2024 and will top that this year. "People want to work here." On their employee engagement survey, "we went up in every way."

"We're always going to be there," he said, "keep our programs laser focused on the patient and the community needs. We don't grow for growth's sake. We grow when people need us to grow services."

Last year, he said, Vandalia saw more than 2.7 million patient interactions (which can include one person making multiple visits) and nearly 5,000 births. Vandalia's emergency rooms saw about 250,000 visits.

"That speaks volumes of the volume of people that are choosing Vandalia hospitals and clinics. Mon Health and Davis Health saw nearly 400,000 clinic visits.

Vandalia is the second-largest non-governmental employer in the state, he said, with 13,000 employees. Mon Health has 6,000.

Vandalia facilities, he said, are some of the largest economic development and employment organizations in their communities, paying tens of millions of dollars in payroll tax, plus and sales tax on their purchases.

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Vandalia Health

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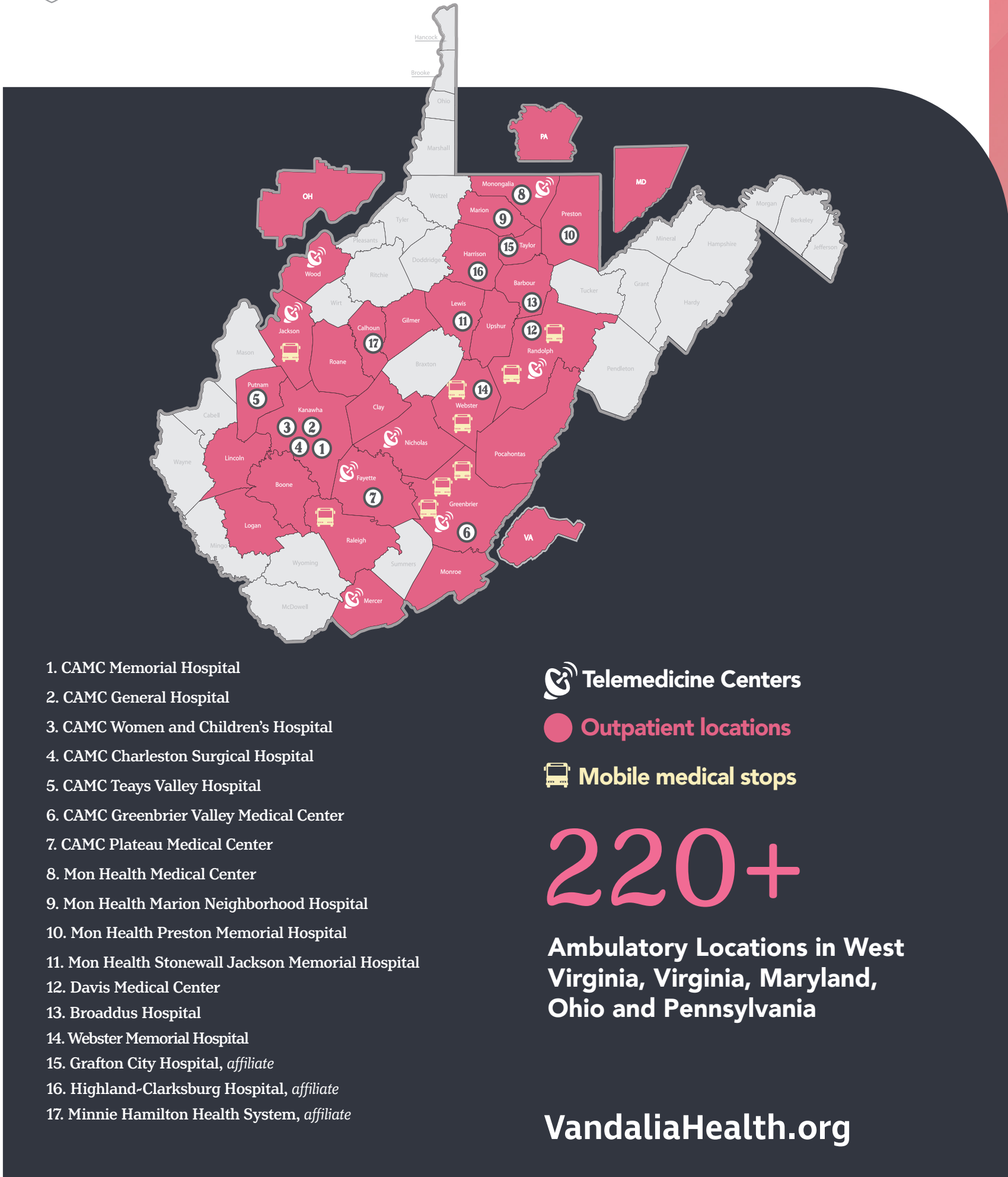
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- + Infrastructure** – Building new facilities and hospitals, including a Neurosciences Institute in Charleston, new hospitals in Harrison and Lewis counties, and a physician office building in Ronceverte to house new specialists and primary care providers.
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MON COUNTY EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES

EMS Academy boasts lofty pass rates

BY BEN CONLEY

BConley@DominionPost.com

The West Virginia Office of Emergency Medical Services awarded Monongalia Emergency Medical Services (Mon EMS) a five-year accreditation as an EMS educational institution in April 2023.

The agency sought the designation as a means to combat national staffing shortages and insulate itself from poor pass rates for prospective emergency medical technicians and paramedics in the state

Mon EMS created full-time educator positions, so instead of waiting on someone to just walk through the door with the appropriate accreditations in hand, they can hire someone with an interest in the job and pay them to complete 320 hours of instruction – compared to the state minimum of 155.

So far, so good.

Two recent classes of the Mon EMS Academy have boasted perfect pass rates on national exams.

According to National Registry of Emergency Medical Technicians data from 2024, the first attempt pass rate for West Virginians taking the EMT national exam was 55%, the second lowest rate in the county. Mississippi was last with a 50% pass rate.

Mon EMS Executive Director Forest Weyen said the mindset around EMS education in West Virginia had become very outdated.

“That’s one of the reasons we brought our education in house to where we wanted to make sure we controlled for that. I think the state was leery of the fact that we were doing this hire-to-train program and going to a new model where we’re going to bring people in and train them full-time and



Photo Courtesy Mon EMS

The most recent class of the Mon EMS EMT Academy achieved a 100% pass rate during national exams. They are, from left, Helena Radford, Austin Kacish, Kendal Washington, Peyton Norman, Chris Gomez, Caden Schmidle, Courtney White, Melissa Cothran and Zoe Lance.

put them in the field,” he said. “I think the state has been pleasantly surprised because our pass rates are so high and now they’re asking, you know, ‘What are you guys doing?’ It’s just a very intensive program. It’s very clinically focused. It’s very engaging and it really challenges you so that, ultimately, when the people go and take a test, they’re able to pass.”

Weyen said the “hire-to-train” model is becoming common in agencies across the country.

“They still have to pass national exams. They still have to pass all the state requirements, but instead of doing all that on their own, that becomes

their fist six or eight weeks of employment – to get all that training and education. It’s a full-time, eight-hour day course load. That’s your job for eight weeks, getting ready to pass that test.”

Mon EMS rolls out whole blood program

On May 1, Mon EMS became the third agency in West Virginia to offer whole blood prehospitally as a lifesaving measure for patients in critical condition with significant blood loss due to traumatic injury or other medical reasons.

Nationally, there are less than

100 agencies offering the service.

Barring other complications, a patient suffering a severe hemorrhage has about 30 minutes to either receive blood or arrive in an operating room before the likelihood of survival plummets dramatically. On average in the U.S., the time between a 911 call and an operating table is 74 to 88 minutes.

Mon EMS leadership have said this capability will have its greatest impact in the more rural parts of the county, where transportation time is already a critical component of emergency care.

“Whole blood” contains all blood components – red blood cells, plasma and platelets.

Low titer Type O+ whole blood has been shown to be safe for patients of all ages and blood types, including children and pregnant women. It’s approved for transfusion to critically ill and injured patients whose blood type is unknown by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration as well as the Association for the Advancement of Blood & Biotherapies.

The blood, as well as the approximately \$10,000 in man-portable equipment, will be carried by shift supervisors driving the Mon EMS SUVs.

They can arrive on scene in addition to an ambulance for calls in which heavy blood loss is indicated.

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RECOGNITIONS

Vandalia Health, WVU Medicine announce honors

BY DAVID BEARD

DBeard@DominionPost.com

MORGANTOWN — Vandalia Health, WVU Medicine and WVU announced some honors and recognitions their respective systems recently received.

Vandalia Health Mon Medical Center

Vandalia Health Mon Medical Center was nationally recognized by Healthgrades for excellence in both patient experience and cardiac care.

The hospital received two major distinctions from Healthgrades: 2025 Outstanding Patient Experience Award and Five Star Recipient for Pacemaker Procedures for 5 Years in a Row (2021-2025).

The Outstanding Patient Experience Award is based on results from the Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems survey, a nationally administered tool by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. The survey captures patients' perspectives on communication with doctors and nurses, hospital cleanliness, staff responsiveness, discharge instructions and overall care.

Healthgrades evaluated hospitals using data from more than 100 completed HCAHPS surveys per facility, ensuring each met minimum clinical quality benchmarks. Only the top 15 percent of hospitals nationwide received this award.

"We are delighted to receive these distinctions from Healthgrades, which reflect our commitment to compassionate, patient-centered care," said Krystal Atkinson, chief

administrative officer and chief nursing officer of Mon Health Medical Center and chief nursing executive of Vandalia Health-Northern Region. "We are proud that our patients feel heard, respected, and well cared for during their time with us, and equally proud of the exceptional care that we are able to provide to them with the advanced clinical expertise of our physicians."

To determine five-star recipients, Healthgrades analyzed risk-adjusted mortality and complication rates for over 30 of the most common conditions and procedures at approximately 4,500 hospitals nationwide.

"Earning this Five-Star recognition from Healthgrades year after year shows our unwavering dedication to excellence in cardiac care," said Dr. Salam Shaity, cardiologist, Mon Medical Center. "Our team is proud to provide patients in our region with leading technology and clinical expertise for advanced pacemaker procedures — delivered with precision, compassion and a strong focus on patient outcomes."

Brad Bowman, chief medical officer and head of data science at Healthgrades, commented, "Healthgrades commends Mon Medical Center for its clear commitment to delivering consistently superior patient outcomes in critical service areas, Mon Medical Center's leadership, expertise and unwavering dedication to clinical excellence set a high mark for specialty care in West Virginia and nationwide."

WVU Medicine

WVU Medicine has been named to the 2024



Submitted photo

West Virginia University announced that Dr. Ali Rezai, executive chair of the Rockefeller Neuroscience Institute, received the 2025 Ellis Island Medal of Honor.

edition of the Becker's Hospital Review "Hospitals and Health Systems with Great Innovation Programs" list, which was released May 7.

The 52 hospitals and health systems featured on the list are celebrated for their strong commitment to innovation. Through strategic investments in cutting-edge technologies, advanced clinical techniques, and forward-thinking training programs, these organizations are driving improvements in patient outcomes.

Becker's spotlights institutions with dynamic innovation programs that push the boundaries of research and discovery in healthcare. This list was curated through a combination of editorial research and nominations highlighting organizations that are shaping the future of medicine.

WVU Medicine was recognized for leveraging "innovative clinical programs, groundbreaking research, and strategic partnerships to improve care delivery throughout West Virginia."

Specifically, the profile featured the WVU Rockefeller Neuroscience Institute as being "globally recognized for pioneering the use of focused ultrasound to open the blood-brain barrier and deliver targeted treatments for Alzheimer's disease and substance use disorders."

It also highlighted the WVU Heart and Vascular Institute as "a national leader in robotic cardiac surgery and has earned widespread recognition for advanced cardiovascular therapies and training."

Other featured programs include the Aspiring Nurse Program and Center for Nursing Education, which "counter workforce shortages and expand access to care," and the establishment of Peak Health and the WVU Innovation Corp., which support "insurance reform, job creation, and economic development."

"We pride ourselves on being a bold health system that isn't afraid to take risks," said Albert Wright, president and CEO of the WVU Health System. "Innovations in healthcare — be they new treatments, new procedures, or new medical technology — can't happen without at least a little risk, and the ones that go the distance, like our highlighted programs, are a win-win for us and our patients."

"In fact, each of our programs that Becker's recognized are part of our WVU Medicine 2035 Strategic Plan, and we intend to further build upon and strengthen those programs in the coming decade and beyond," he said.

Mon Stonewall Jackson Memorial

Mon Stonewall Jackson Memorial Hospital was also recognized by Healthgrades as a Five-Star Recipient for Total Knee Replacement for the third consecutive year (2023-2025). This distinction places the hospital among a select group nationwide recognized for consistently delivering outstanding clinical outcomes in knee replacement surgery.

Rockefeller Neuroscience Institute

West Virginia University announced that Dr. Ali Rezai, executive chair of the Rockefeller Neuroscience Institute, received the 2025 Ellis Island Medal of Honor.

This annual award celebrates "inspiring Americans who are selflessly working for the betterment of our country and its citizens." Both houses of Congress view the medal as one of the nation's most prestigious awards, recognizing its honorees in the Congressional Record.

In selecting Rezai, the Ellis Island Honors Society cited his pioneering work in neuroscience using technologies such as focused ultrasound and deep brain stimulation to unlock new potential in the treatment of Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease, addiction, and other conditions.

"At the RNI, we're on a mission to tackle some of the most pressing public health challenges of our time," Rezai said. "I am humbled to receive this honor alongside so many impressive Americans, all of whom have made significant contributions to our country and the world beyond. Thank you to the Ellis Island Honors Society for this award."

Since 1986, this award has been presented to U.S. presidents, Supreme Court justices, Nobel Prize laureates, captains of industry, and other noteworthy Americans. Past recipients include Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, Donald Trump, Sandra Day O'Connor, John McCain, Rosa Parks, Muhammad Ali, Bob Hope, Lee Iacocca, Quincy Jones, Frank Sinatra, and Coretta Scott King.

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Krystal Atkinson, chief administrative officer and chief nursing officer of Mon Health Medical Center and chief nursing executive of Vandalia Health-Northern Region

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Submitted photo

The Layer 7 Cortical Interface uses Precision Neuroscience’s electrode technology to map human brain activity.

RESEARCH

Brains and computers interface at Rockefeller Neuroscience Institute

BY DAVID BEARD

DBeard@DominionPost.com

MORGANTOWN — In April 2024, cutting-edge research at WVU’s Rockefeller Neuroscience Institute was helping people with neurological injuries and disabilities function and communicate.

Since then, progress has been made in the technology and the research.

Dr. Peter Konrad, chair of neurosurgery at RNI, and Radhey Sharma, professor in WVU’s Wadsworth Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, led RNI’s first in-human trials of Precision Neuroscience’s Layer 7 Cortical Interface, the first time Precision’s electrode technology was used to map human brain activity.

Precision explains that Layer 7 contains 1,024 tiny electrodes spanning an area of one square centimeter, embedded in a flexible film that conforms to the brain surface.

The film is one-fifth the thickness of a human hair and is designed to be implanted and removed by neurosurgeons without damaging brain tissue. The device is engineered to map a large area of the brain’s surface at resolutions hundreds of times more detailed than typical arrays used in neurosurgical procedures.

RNI’s human trials began in April 2023. Konrad implanted the Layer 7 on six patients who were undergoing tumor removal surgery in the area responsible for speech production.

Some were unconscious, some were awake and could speak; they had the Layer 7 implanted for 15 minutes and the RNI team was able to capture the brain activity for patients in both states, in real time and in detail never before achieved.

The team was able to observe neural activity linked to speech in real time and decode speech intent before words were spoken, with 80-90% accuracy, Precision reported.

The research was funded by a National Science Foundation Grant. Following our April report, RNI hosted the inaugural Brain-Machine Interface Summit in Morgantown in August.

It’s also called brain-computer interface, and Konrad said for this report that this spring the RNI team published the first peer-reviewed paper regarding patients in trial.

“We can detect and train an AI model for language very quickly with this device, to help us develop potentially down the road an artificial speech prosthetic for people.” One graduate student is working spe-



Dr. Pete Konrad

cifically in that area.

And Precision, based on data RNI helped collect, he said, won FDA approval for a limited short-term trial for external use in patients, for up to 30 days. RNI will be leading the initial roll out of that, with tentative approval to begin in the next month or two.

Konrad explained what “external” means in this context. Patients who undergo brain surgery spend some days in ICU. For those who participate, the Layer 7 array is placed on the brain surface, brought through the scalp and connected to a decoder of sorts. The data from the 1,024 channels is fed into a computer to be recorded and analyzed.

A third area of progress: Konrad wants to see if the array and device would have value placed over the spinal cord. They did the first human study on that about a month ago. “That’s been very interesting. I’m getting ready to write that up and look at the data in more detail.”

He said Layer 7 allows them to see the brain process data with vastly more resolution than current standards. The electrode contacts are 35 microns – about the size of six or seven blood cells. By comparison, wires and electrodes put into the brain for epilepsy monitoring have 10-20 contacts and data channels where the Layer 7 has 1,024

That amount of resolution might be able to help them pick up enough detail of the signals going up and down the spinal cord. “This is something, in turn, I think we might be able to transform into an electronic patch, so to speak, across areas of spinal cord injury.”

Konrad said he recently visited Johns Hopkins to talk with them about the spinal cord opportunities. “They were very much on board with joining us on that.” RNI might have a collaborative agreement with Hopkins in another year.

Konrad remarked on the speed of the progress of the research into Precision’s device. It normally takes 10-15 years for proof

of concept studies to reach a marketable device approved by FDA.

For this, “in one year now we’ve been able to get a clinical trial approved and get 10 patients enrolled.”

Precision has gotten FDA approval on a preliminary version of the device in a year and a half. “It’s actually pretty remarkable how quick this is going.”

RNI is also the flagship institution for testing future Precision devices, while other centers are following up on RNI research with additional studies.

Looking forward, Konrad said he would like to develop a bigger consortium for BCI research projects for other conditions.

Precision reports that it is testing Layer 7 with research collaborations with RNI and University of Pennsylvania’s Perelman School of Medicine, and Mount Sinai Health System in New York, and is set to expand its research partnerships.

And it bought Precision BioMEMS in Texas. The facility is a 22,000 square foot micro-electrical mechanical systems (MEMS) fabrication facility that produces its biocompatible microelectrode arrays and offers foundry services to third-party companies.

Konrad said of Precision, “They have vision of where they want to bring this in a few years from now, which is really exciting to me because it’s going to be a big order of magnitude improvement of what we have now.”

Dr. Benjamin Rapoport, co-founder and chief science officer at Precision, said, “BCI technology has the potential to transform the lives of people living with paralysis. But to achieve this, we need a deep understanding of how neural activity corresponds to movement and speech. With our device, which offers hundreds of times the resolution of traditional electrodes, we are recording the most detailed neural signals ever captured, paving the way for a highly impactful BCI solution.”

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VANDALIA HEALTH

Mon Health System expands to meet patient needs

BY DAVID BEARD

DBeard@DominionPost.com

MORGANTOWN — Mon Health System continues upgrades and expansion of its facilities and services. Here's a look at some projects in progress.

Vandalia Health Mon Medical Center is building a new hybrid procedure room in its operating room area. A hybrid room is a place where doctors can perform cath lab-type procedures, but is equipped to be quickly turned into a full-fledged OR if the situation requires, said David Goldberg, president and CEO of Mon Health System and Davis Health System – Vandalia Health Northern Region..

Mon Medical Center has had a hybrid room, he said, but the equipment aged out and the space has been dormant, so they're building a new one.

The electrophysiology lab will see an upgrade. "We have outpaced our space for electrophysiology as so much has expanded," Goldberg said.

Electrophysiology deals with heart rhythms – such as AFIB – and heart rhythm issues are growing, he said. So they're adding more capability.

Both projects are expected to be completed by year's end, he said.

Expansion of the urology clinic on the fourth floor is under way, Goldberg said. Adjacent space once held the ob/gyn clinic, which moved down to the medical park along W.Va. 705. That space is getting redone for a larger urology clinic.

Outside Morgantown, Mon Health Preston Memorial Hospital has outgrown its clinical space, Goldberg said. Grants of \$3 million from Congressionally Directed Spending and \$1.5 million from the West Virginia Rural Hospital Grant Program are enabling expansion into shelled space to create additional patient care areas.



An artist's rendering of the oncology wing planned for Mon Health Preston Memorial Hospital.



An artist's rendering of the new Vandalia Health Mon Harrison Neighborhood Hospital to be constructed at Charles Pointe Crossing.

They expect this project to be completed by the end of the year, or no later than first quarter next year, Goldberg said.

The 6,000-square-foot expansion will feature a dedicated entrance for oncology and infusion patients to enhance in-

fection prevention measures and provide a more private experience. The space will include eight infusion bays, three exam rooms, and additional clinical areas tailored to the needs of oncology patients. The expansion will also provide additional square footage for providers and support staff.

And in Bridgeport, site preparation is under way for the new Vandalia Health Mon Harrison Neighborhood Hospital at Charles Pointe Crossing, Goldberg said. Permits, architectural design, engineering plans are in hand and they are ordering steel.

The nearly \$30 million facility will be a two-story, 40,000-square-foot small format hospital, modeled after Vandalia Health Mon Marion Neighborhood Hospital,

which opened in White Hall in 2022.

The first floor will have 24/7 emergency care, including eight emergency rooms; board-certified physicians; comprehensive inpatient care, including 10 private inpatient rooms; pharmacy services; and advanced radiology services, including CT, MRI, ultrasound, X-ray and echocardiogram.

The second floor will be shell space reserved for future clinical or administrative expansion, designed to address future needs of the community. The hospital is planned to be open in July 2026.

The site includes three acres plus 17 adjacent acres for expanding the campus as needed, Goldberg said.



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MONONGALIA COUNTY

Something to smile about

MCHD upgrades to new custom mobile dental office

BY MARY WADE BURNSIDE
Monongalia County Health Department

When Tiffany Summerlin, a registered dental hygienist at Monongalia County Health Department’s Dentistry office, took the old Smile Express mobile unit out on the road, its limitations quickly came to light.

Slide-outs that provided additional room started showing age and the team was on edge each time they extended and retracted. Its questionable road-worthiness during the wintertime also meant that it remained garaged for the cold season, forcing Summerlin and dental assistant Velvet Urgo to use portable equipment that they hauled to and from schools in four counties where they saw patients, along with two recovery centers.

“The inability to use it in freezing temperatures cut down on our productivity,” Summerlin said.

So when Summerlin met Jim Smallridge, lead director of community development for Aetna Better Health of West Virginia, in a community group they both support, conversations led to the organization providing \$500,000 for the Smile Express program to upgrade to a brand-new, custom-built mobile dental office.

“That’s been a monumental change for us,” Summerlin said. “It’s

much more efficient. While it’s not as expansive with the absence of slides, it’s much better laid out. Everything has a deliberate purpose.”

The Smile Express program was launched in 2018 with the used RV, having a primary purpose of traveling to schools in six counties to treat students without a dental home and to also refer them to care in their communities.

Like the old mobile clinic, the new “Smiley” — a 2023 Winnebago commercial chassis customized to Summerlin’s specifications — features two dental operatories, a panoramic radiograph for X-rays and software that allows providers on board to send X-rays and other treatment information back to Dr. Youseph Kassir, MCHD Dentistry program manager.

Smiley 2.0 also has a wheelchair lift, a roomier bathroom, side mirror cameras that enhance driving safety, along with a compressor and vacuum system in the “basement” of the chassis that provides identical accommodations found in a brick-and-mortar dental operatory.

“If you know anything about compressors, they are noisy,” Summerlin said. “We used to have a portable one sitting next to the patient and it was in our ears all day long. Now it’s underneath the unit so it’s a much better



Courtesy of MCHD

From left, Monongalia County Health Department executive director Anthony DeFelice, Todd White and Jim Smallridge of Aetna Better Health of West Virginia, Smile Express coordinator Tiffany Summerlin, Dr. Youseph Kassir and BOH President Sam Chico at the new Smile Express “floss” cutting last fall. Below, Summerlin discusses the Smile Express mobile unit with Smallridge. The two met as colleagues on a community project, which led to the \$500,000 grant that funded the upgraded mobile unit.



environment for everyone.”

In the previous set-up, Urgo’s back was to everyone as she entered data on a computer. The new design allows her to greet patients and interact with them more easily.

“Now I can face them

and talk to them, listening to any issues they are having,” Urgo said. “It helps to calm any anxiety they might have about being seen while they wait.”

Being able to store dental hygiene products underneath her work area also allows her to access

them easily to hand out instead of having to take the time to do a search.

Summerlin and Urgo, the primary Smile Express crew, had already added area substance use recovery centers to their itinerary before last October’s ribbon-cutting for the new mobile unit.

Now, with funding from the Monongalia County Commission, they have expanded their outreach to visit patients at additional locations.

Currently, they go to Wise Path in Westover, the WVU Center of Hope and Healing and Valley Health Care Systems, with new ones coming on board in the near future.

“I feel very humbled to treat patients who are at a vulnerable place in their lives,” Summerlin said. “Many of these individuals are grateful to the point of shedding tears or telling stories about their lives that I feel very honored that they would trust me with their dental health,” Summerlin said.

Brad Pershing, the senior director of operations of Wise Path,

has welcomed Smile Express to the recovery center for more than two years now.

“They have had a profound positive impact servicing the patients of Wise Path Recovery Centers,” Pershing said. “By providing compassionate, nonjudgmental care, the Smile Express team has enhanced self-confidence while reducing risk of infection and pain. Our clients look forward to this service and express heartfelt gratitude after each encounter.”

With six months on the new Smile Express under her belt, Summerlin’s concerns with issues the former unit created have eased.

A bonus has been the ability to store the mobile unit in the new MECCA 911 garage. She had to find ways to keep the old one warm.

“There are things inside like delivery systems and autoclaves that cannot freeze,” she said. “It’s a lot less of a mental load for me for sure. My brain was always worrying and now I don’t have to worry.”

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CLINICAL TRIALS

Advancing the future of cancer care

WVU Medicine

MORGANTOWN — When Debra “Pepper” Coles of Morgantown learned she had small cell lung cancer, she knew she would fight. Full of life and eager to spend more of it with her three children, 14 grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren, Coles jumped when given the opportunity to take part in a clinical trial at the WVU Cancer Institute.

“No matter what I have to do, I’m going to do it,” Coles said. “I’m going to live as long as I can. I’ve got to watch these grandbabies graduate.”

Coles participates in one of the many ongoing cancer clinical trials — research studies that investigate how well new medical approaches work in humans — at the WVU Cancer Institute Clinical Research Unit. Clinical trials are vital to cancer research because they pave the way for new treatments, improve cancer care and quality of life, and help researchers learn more about the disease.

The WVU Cancer Institute is an ideal clinical trial facility, in part due to the large population of deeply rooted, rural patients it serves. These patients tend to be loyal to their care teams and very resilient despite facing unique challenges due to the state’s infrastructure. These attributes, along with qualified staff and an expert level of research experience, allow the WVU Cancer Institute’s Clinical Research Unit to offer a robust profile of clinical trials for each cancer type at various stages to serve as many patients as possible.

In addition to the WVU Cancer Institute, clinical trials are also conducted at five satellite WVU Medicine facilities — Berkeley Medical Center in Martinsburg, Camden Clark Medical Center in Parkersburg, Princeton Community Hospital, United Hospital Center in Bridgeport, and Wheeling Hospital.

“Offering clinical trials is a vital part of our mission to bring the best healthcare options to West Virginia,” Anne Michels, director of the Clinical Research Unit, said. “Clinical trials allow our patients to have access to a treatment that may not be widely available yet close to home. When our patients volunteer, they become part of a team looking toward the future in cancer care.”

New treatment development

To begin her first cycle of chemotherapy, Coles was admitted to J.W. Ruby Memorial Hospital. She had a tumor that had grown from her lung above her

breast, which presented as a palpable lump. Her care team identified her as a good candidate for a clinical trial for small cell lung cancer, and Coles eagerly agreed and enrolled.

The day after she left the hospital following her first treatment, she could no longer feel the lump. It was gone. She asked her oncologist, Dr. Mohammed Almubarak, chief of Solid Oncology, what happened.

“He said, ‘It was the chemo,’” Coles recalled. “Isn’t that amazing?”

“Our goal is not only to make people live longer, but to also have a good quality of life, and that’s something that comes with these newer treatments,” Dr. Almubarak said.

He explained that in an oncology clinical trial, patients could either receive the standard treatment or the new treatment. The new treatment in clinical trials may be administered by adding another treatment to a standard established therapy or by attempting a new treatment that might be more effective than the established one.

At minimum, Almubarak said, patients receive the standard treatment. “It’s not like you either get the new treatment or you get nothing,” he added.

Coles’ most recent test showing how the treatment is affecting the cancerous spot in her body was encouraging. “You could barely even see it,” she said about the spot. “I was celebrating.”

Extra layer of cancer care

“Clinical trials are written with patient safety in mind,” Shannon Filburn, clinical manager of the Clinical Research Unit, said. “One of our coordinators is monitoring your care all along the way. We treat our patients like VIPs.”

Oncology patients are closely monitored and tested during treatment at various intervals by their care team. During a clinical trial, a research team also monitors each patient, providing an extra layer of care and serving as an additional contact for questions.

“I’m so thankful for this ongoing check-in,” Ellen Butcher, a teacher from Ellenboro, said. She is participating in a clinical trial for triple negative breast cancer, and she noted that the care team has been extremely supportive throughout the process.

“I feel like we are on top of things and will know quickly if anything returns,” Butcher added. “I have the most amazing support group because of this trial.”



WVU MEDICINE CHILDREN’S
Work begins on outpatient clinic

BY DAVID BEARD
DBeard@DominionPost.com

MORGANTOWN — Construction has begun on the new outpatient clinic on the 10th floor of WVU Medicine Children’s.

The 15,214-square-foot clinic will take shape in shell space on the 10th floor, and will consolidate outpatient services via a dedicated clinic space to streamline care and access for patients and their families.

The project will build out new clinical space for existing services, including medical weight management, neurology, neurosurgery, pulmonology, sleep disorders, plastic surgery, trauma, surgery and their associated multidisciplinary clinics and procedure spaces.

In February, the WVU Medicine Children’s Gala, titled Into the Jungle, raised more than \$1.65 million to support the children’s hospital, and a portion of those proceeds support the new Children’s Outpatient Clinic, WVUM said. “WVU Medicine Children’s is grateful to the community for their support of our mission.”

Several notable gifts have already bolstered the fundraising effort, WVUMC said, including a \$500,000 contribution from the Mountain Loggers Group.

WVUMC said the total estimated project cost is \$10 million and construction is expected to be finished this year.





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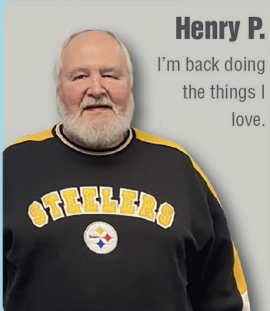
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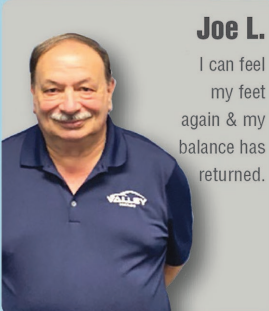
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CARDIAC TECHNOLOGY

Robotic aortic valve replacement procedure developed at WVU being used around the world

BY DAVID BEARD

DBeard@DominionPost.com

MORGANTOWN

WVU recently brought heart surgeons from across the country around the world to Morgantown to learn about a valve replacement technique developed at WVU, and take it back with them to help their patients.

“What we have helped create here in West Virginia for our West Virginian population is now exported around the globe,” said Dr. Vinay Badhwar, who developed the procedure with his WVU colleague Dr. Lawrence Wei. Badhwar is executive chair of WVU’s Heart and Vascular Institute.

The international symposium, hosted by HVI and WVU’s Robotic Cardiac Surgery Program, took place last November and continues to resonate as the visiting surgeons take the procedure into their operating rooms.

The procedure is called Robotic Aortic Valve Replacement (RAVR), and we’ll jump back in time to explain it.

Badhwar said all blood flow from the heart crosses and leaves the heart through the aortic valve. Aortic valve stenosis – blockage – is one of most common ailments afflicting people as they age.

It’s treated by two methods, not counting RAVR. One is surgical replacement done via through the middle of the chest in an open heart procedure. They open the aorta, clean out the calcium and implant a new valve.

For higher-risk patients who should not undergo



Submitted photo

Dr. Vinay Badhwa from the WVU Heart and Vascular Institutue speaks at an international symposium to explain a robotic surgical procedure for valve replacement.

an open heart procedure, there is the transcatheter aortic valve replacement (TAVR). The catheter goes in through the groin and up to the heart via the femoral artery. They place an expandable valve inside the existing valve that opens and pushes the existing valve aside. Trying this procedure in lower risk patients is in its early stages.

Badhwar said he and Wei, building on their long experience in robotic mitral valve surgery (the mitral valve sits between the left atrium and the left ventricle – the upper and

lower chambers on the left side), began investigating robotic replacement.

As with the robotic mitral valve replacement, it involves a 1-2 inch incision at the armpit level on the right side of the chest. After experimentation, in January 2020 they performed the world’s first RAVR. And in April, they published data for the 300 cases they’ve done so far.

In November 2022, after about 100 cases, Badhwar invited several leaders from around the world to witness several procedures. They created a consortium and agreed to

a path forward for the specialty, adopting the WVU technique and teaching it around the world. Now there about 30 centers around the world using the WVU technique.

And, he said, they’ve taught all the top centers around the U.S., that are now doing their first cases. They include the Cleveland Clinic, Mayo Clinic, Columbia and Baylor. And globally, in Europe, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan and Australia. These other centers have done somewhere from 50-100 cases.

“The outcomes are really superb,” he said.

That brings us to the November symposium, drawing more than 80 experts from 16 states and 11 countries, representing 41 academic medical centers – and stimulating those experts to perform more cases at their centers.

Badhwar was asked whether RAVR, being minimally invasive, could ultimately displace or replace the other two methods.

The short answer was no.

Expanding on that, he said patients always prefer the least invasive method. But the open

heart surgery is proven and has a lot of evidence for excellent long-term outcomes. TAVR is really good for patients with no other option or for patients who are lower risk but have other issues.

RAVR could offer an alternative to open heart in lower risk patients.

“The whole point of us developing this is to provide that alternative to both surgical aortic valve replacement, but also transcatheter therapy, particularly in patients that are of lower or intermediate calculated risk.”

It also has the potential, he said, for less healthy patients who need multiple heart procedures and can’t tolerate an open chest incision or are not appropriate for the transcatheter valve.

“This provides that unique opportunity so we can still treat patients and give them complete care, but through less invasive means.”

Badhwar wrapped up noting that advancement at WVU is just driven by surgeons. At HVI, they have a multi-disciplinary partnership with cardiology colleagues who often drive the surgeons to innovate, and they do so together.

“As we approach innovation and new technology here at WVU Medicine and at the WVU Heart and Vascular Institute, it’s not done flippantly. We look at this very carefully in a multi-disciplinary way to make sure that we ensure patient safety, but also long-term outcomes. That’s how we’re moving this field forward.”

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SC 6:00 PM FATHER'S DAY	OFF	@TRE 7:00 PM	@TRE 7:00 PM	@TRE 7:00 PM	WIL 7:00 PM	WIL 7:00 PM
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AUGUST

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@MV 2:05 PM	OFF	SC 6:00 PM	SC 6:00 PM	SC 6:00 PM	TRE 7:00 PM	TRE 7:00 PM
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