

Grace Hospital takes flight

By JENNIFER M. PHELPS
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MORGANTON - Disaster can strike at any time. When it does, knowing medical help will arrive quickly can be a great relief.

Beginning this month, a MedCenter Air transport helicopter from Carolinas Medical Center will be stationed at Grace Hospital to provide faster attention to critically injured and medically unstable persons in Burke County. The service will be offered two days a week and will eliminate the need on those days to call on airlift from Charlotte, which takes an average of 28 minutes to reach our area, said Laura Lambeth, vice president of physician and patient care services for Blue Ridge HealthCare.

At an open house at Grace Hospital on Monday, representatives from Blue Ridge HealthCare's partnering agencies, as well as community residents, were invited to look at the aircraft and talk with its pilot and medical team.

Charlotte Menk, flight nurse, said having a transport service directly available within the Blue Ridge HealthCare System will greatly increase the quality of care deliverable.

"Federal regulations require that from the time a transport helicopter's flight crew is dispatched, they must be off the ground in 10 minutes," Menk said. "Hopefully now, sicker patients (in Burke County) can get to a tertiary care facility faster than the one and a half hours it takes to get them there by ambulance."

Menk said the aircraft can carry up to two patients at a time, with a pilot and two flight nurses or a flight nurse and respiratory therapist also on board. All flight crew members, she said, are licensed paramedics.

Director of Burke County Emergency Medical Services, Clint Patton, said having MedCenter Air stationed at Grace Hospital will help make the community's limited ambulance resources more available.

"We average a high EMS call volume," Patton said. "With the helicopter transporting people, we'll have more vehicles to use. This is an absolute win-win situation for everyone."

Helen Fountain, director of neonatology at Grace Hospital, said even newborns will benefit from MedCenter Air services being stationed within the Blue Ridge HealthCare System.

"We'll be able to quickly transport babies that we can't take care of here," Fountain said, "like those who are premature or suffer from complicated medical conditions. It's exciting to start something new like this, something Burke County has needed for a while."

Fountain said infants are moved from Grace Hospital once or twice a month.

"When you need the service, it's good to know you have it," she said, adding that as Blue Ridge HealthCare continues making advances in patient care, she expects delivery service and the need for direct transportation of newborns to increase in the community.

Morganton resident Guinn Huffman brought her grandsons, Tyler and Ethan Cook, to the helipad at Grace Hospital on Monday.

"I told them it's just wonderful that we have this service here in our backyard," Huffman said. "I just want them to be aware of it. We may need to use this service someday, or they might decide to go into this profession. I like to help educate them."

Alex Pritchard, 10, came to look at the helicopter with his mother, Karen, of Morganton.



JENNIFER M. PHELPS | THE NEWS HERALD Charlotte Menk, a flight nurse on staff at Carolinas Medical Center in Charlotte, explains to Ethan Cook, 9, how a MedCenter Air helicopter operates, while flight crew members outside discuss emergency transport.

"It's a good service they're providing to the community," Alex said. "It's really cool and pretty interesting. I learned they can land on the side of a mountain, in fields and on roads. They're very versatile helicopters. This'll save people's lives."

Katie Benfield, vice president of administration at Carolinas Medical Center, agreed that saving lives was truly a goal in orchestrating a partnership with Blue Ridge HealthCare.

"There's already great health care provided in this area," Benfield said. "We're bringing our resources here not to take away anything Blue Ridge HealthCare is already doing, but to provide additional services."

"Bringing helicopter transport service to Burke County is another step forward in raising the standard of emergency care for its citizens," said Kenneth W. Wood, president and chief executive officer of Blue Ridge Health Care. "But this could not have happened without a spirit of cooperation between Mountain View Emergency Physicians, Burke County EMS, Carolinas HealthCare System and Blue Ridge HealthCare System."

Lambeth said working with such a diligent staff at Carolinas Medical Center made the project even more exciting.

"And seeing the turnout today (Monday) is exciting, too," she said. "I'm pleased with the turnout not only from community leaders, but also from its citizens. They're very interested in what's going on."
