



Staff photo by Adam Anik

MAKING ADVANCEMENTS: Mountainside Hospital, located on the Montclair/Glen Ridge border, is undergoing a number of changes, including recruiting physicians, improved outpatient care and adding an updated information system.

Officials: Mountainside unaffected by other Merit hospital closure

By **ERICA ZARRA**
of *The Montclair Times*

Although a Merit Health Systems-operated hospital recently closed in Texas, Mountainside Hospital Chief Executive Officer C. Barry Dykes said that his facility, also owned by Merit, is in fine shape.

"What goes on in Dallas, Texas, and what goes on in Montclair, NJ, is very different," Dykes told *The Times*. "They have a whole different kind of market, different payers, different service mixes, so trying to draw a relationship between the hospital in Lancaster, Texas, and the hospital here is a pretty big stretch.

"We are in a whole different situation. This is great hospital with a great reputation."

Medical Center in Lancaster shut its doors after 25 years of service due to what Merit spokesperson Joe Poulos attributed to hospital competition, a high rate of uncompensated care and an inability to negotiate lower HMO rates.

"The bottom line is that all of our hospitals are operating independently," Poulos said. "So the situation at Medical Center in Lancaster is really in no way related to Mountainside or other hospitals in the Merit network."

Poulos noted that all of Kentucky-based Merit Health Systems' facilities have separate budgets, funding, balance sheets and administrations.

"Merit is involved in the management, and communicates with the management teams of the hospitals, so all hands are on deck," Poulos said.

Dykes, who arrived at Mountainside after Merit acquired the facility, said "there are a lot of positive changes" the administration is making, such as recruiting new doctors, improved outpatient care, and adding an updated information system.

Merit has committed \$20 million to invest on capital and staffing improvements to the Bay Avenue structure through the next decade.

Dykes noted that Mountainside's only immediate capital improvement is the installation of a 128-slice Computerized Tomography (CT) scanner, which Dykes described as a piece of state-of-the-art X-ray equipment that scans various parts of the body.

"We are in the process of beginning a strategic plan so that we know how to deploy that capital," Dykes said.

The CEO mentioned a number of staffing improvements to the healthcare facility.

Mountainside is recruiting a combination of hospital-based and private-practice physicians, "from obstetricians to oncologists to primary care doctors," Dykes said.

The facility has welcomed a new radiology group called Imaging Specialists of North Jersey, which Dykes described as "a very high-quality group" that is "rebuilding our radiology department." A new radiation oncologist, Jose Barba, who Dykes noted "is well known in this area," also joined the staff.

Dykes said that outpatient care has been made more convenient to patients, such as extended hours for registration to free onsite parking. Mountainside also offers physical therapy and occupational therapy to outpatients in the hospital and in the facility's satellite location in Verona.

Dykes also noted an increase in the hospital's leadership staff.

"We've hired five new executives, and probably close to a dozen new departmental managers, who come very well experienced from all over the area," Dykes said. "Obviously, you need well-seasoned leaders to take the organization where we need to go."

Technology is also improving. Dykes said that the hospital is in the process of implementing a new information system.

Mountainside's Radiology Department has switched to an upgraded archiving communications system, which allows radiology images to be stored in digital format, rather than on film.

"They are so much more easily tracked and read," Dykes said.

Merit Health Systems acquired Mountainside Hospital, located on the Montclair/Glen Ridge border, in June 2007 for \$30 million, which is the amount of bonded debt that the former owner, Atlantic Health, incurred for the facility.

Dykes described Mountainside's current financial situation as "ahead of projections" and noted, "If you look month after month at how we've done, it is a very positive upward trend.

"In the first seven months that I've been here, this hospital continues to surprise me by its high quality and focus on customer service, and I think the future is very bright for the organization," Dykes said.