

HEALTH CARE

Mercy marks a first

C.R. hospital launches open heart surgery program

By Michaela Ramm, The Gazette

CEDAR RAPIDS — About a year after receiving state approval for a cardiovascular surgical program, Mercy Medical Center successfully performed its first open heart surgery this month.

The surgical team — led by Dr. C.C. Lee, the hospital's medical director of cardiac, thoracic and vascular surgery services — performed a triple coronary artery bypass grafting Nov. 1.

The surgery was meant to improve blood flow to the heart for the patient, John Fritz, 66, of Marion.

"He had blockages in his coronary arteries," Lee said. "If he didn't have them (the grafts), he was at risk of having a heart attack."

As of last week, Mercy's surgical team since has performed three open heart surgeries at the hospital.

Last November, Mercy officials obtained a certificate of need from the State Health Facilities Council, part of the Iowa Department of Public Health, to start the surgical program. Hospitals and other medical providers are required to go through the review process for new services and medical equipment costing more than \$1.5 million.

Lee said Mercy's new program allows for the hospital to repair its fragmented continuum of care.

Before the surgical program began, a patient coming to Mercy for heart issues could be seen by cardiologists and have heart catheterization procedures but then would have to be transferred to other hospitals, such as at UnityPoint-St.



Dr. C.C. Lee
Mercy Medical Center



Mercy Medical Center

John Fritz, 66, of Marion, walks down the hall of Mercy Medical Center with the help of nurses following his Nov. 1 open heart surgery at Mercy. Fritz was the first patient to have the procedure done in Mercy's new cardiovascular surgical program.

Luke's Hospital in Cedar Rapids, for open heart surgeries.

Officials say the hospital had to transfer 150 patients a year, on average, to other facilities.

"It's going to be good for the consumer," Lee said. "They can now have another facility they can choose if they want to have their heart surgeries here."

MOVE OPPOSED

There was pushback during the certificate-of-need process when St. Luke's and other hospitals argued Eastern Iowa heart surgical needs already were being met.

In its opposition letter when Mercy first went before the State Health Facilities Council in June 2016, St. Luke's pointed to a section of

Iowa code that requires a new cardiovascular surgical program to perform at least 200 surgeries a year. Therefore, those 150 cases transferred from Mercy were not enough to establish a program, the hospital's officials argued.

According to Iowa Hospital Association data, St. Luke's performed 328 open heart surgeries in 2015.

While hospitals and providers might see a market for a service that would improve the hospital financially, the goal of the certificate-of-need process is to fill community needs.

TEAM TRAINING

Lee, who was brought on in June to build the Mercy program, recruited staff from within the

hospital, and the team conducted training and mock surgeries in the following months. Mercy intensive care unit nurses and operating room staff also received training at Mercy Medical Center in Des Moines.

The team was ready by the time Fritz was admitted to the hospital a week before the surgery for his symptoms.

Fritz said the surgery probably saved his life.

With "men, if you don't have any big symptoms, you don't think there's anything wrong until you mention it to someone," Fritz said. "I had been doing work the week before I probably shouldn't be doing."

Fritz was discharged Nov. 5 and is recovering at home.

Although growing pains are part of establishing a new program, Lee said after this first successful surgery, Mercy's cardiovascular surgical program shows promise going forward.

"My vision is to create a program that's more than just a community program," Lee said. "I want to create a tertiary-type program where we can compete with the University (of Iowa), Mayo Clinic, Des Moines, so that patients don't have to travel to other facilities to have surgeries when it can be done right here in Cedar Rapids."

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