

Community Hospitals Update



Welcome to
Wills Memorial Hospital

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James V. Rawson, M.D., Warren Professor and Chair, Department of Diagnostic, Therapeutic and Interventional Radiology



Multi-slice CT plays critical role in hospital's strategic growth plans

Wills Memorial Hospital is a 25-bed full service hospital located in the rural community of Washington, Georgia. In these tough economic times, Wills has taken a proactive – even visionary, some might say – approach to ensuring that the hospital can continue to serve its community. Among its strategic moves, Wills is the first hospital in its area to:

- Achieve Critical Access status, a regulatory designation that enables Wills to receive cost-based, rather than fee-based, payments for Medicare (and some Medicaid) patients.
- Gain funding through HUD's FHA 242 program to underwrite a much-needed \$13 million replacement of its med-surg unit and clinic facilities, along with renovation of several other key areas.
- Upgrade from single-slice to multi-slice CT in order to gain greater imaging flexibility and expand its diagnostic capabilities.

According to CEO T. Marvin Goldman, Wills' service area comprises a three-county area with 20,000 people, including the 4,000-plus citizens of Washington. There are two other hospitals of equivalent size within 30 miles.

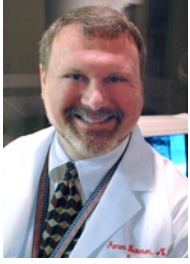
Wills Memorial became a Critical Access hospital in 2003. The Critical Access program was created by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (formerly Health Care Financing Administration) to support hospitals providing access to critical care in rural communities. “A little over 70 percent of our patients qualify for cost-based reimbursement,” says Goldman. “The program is a tremendous safety net for us.”

Among other requirements, to qualify for Critical Access status, a rural hospital must have a formal partnership with a tertiary level hospital that can take on cases too complex for the smaller hospital. This led Wills Memorial to establish a relationship with MCGHealth, the clinical arm of the Medical College of Georgia, and its 540-bed Medical Center located in Augusta, about 50 miles from Wills Memorial.

Multi-slice CT recommended by MCG

In 2008, MCGHealth and Wills Memorial began exploring an expanded radiology relationship in which MCG radiologists would provide medical direction for Wills' radiology department, as well as interpretive services. At that point, imaging studies at Wills were being read by two independent radiologists in the area.

According to James V. Rawson, M.D., Warren Professor and Chair of the Department of Diagnostic, Therapeutic and Interventional Radiology at MCG, a key requirement was that Wills upgrade its single-slice CT system to a multi-slice scanner. “We were concerned about Wills not having a multi-slice scanner,” he says. “A multi-slice scanner gives you much greater imaging flexibility to manage problems in a smaller hospital with limited diagnostic resources.”



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Poor service can be costly

“We looked at the availability and quality of field engineers,” says Dr. Rawson. “If you only have one CT scanner and it’s down, that’s a big issue.” Wills Memorial has a mixed-vendor radiology department but over the years has primarily used GE as its service provider. Director of Radiology Services Debra Hardy has worked at Wills Memorial for over 30 years, and she remembers a brief period when the hospital switched from GE to another service provider. “It was cheaper but we paid for that – in quality and in timeliness. We did not get the service we needed,” she remembers. “GE service is so dependable and the service engineers are so knowledgeable. We’ve never had a problem with GE.”

Dr. Rawson, who also serves as the Wills’ medical director for radiology, says his role in the scanner selection process was to help the hospital, “get the best technology for the money and get it implemented in the smoothest way possible.”

The hospital selected a BrightSpeed™ 16-slice CT system from GE Healthcare. Dr. Rawson guided the hospital to a 16-slice scanner, rather than a 4 or 64-slice, in order to acquire the capabilities that would help it meet the needs of its patient population and grow its volume. The hospital also looked at demographic and financial data to assess the feasibility of the acquisition.

In addition to the advanced capabilities of the BrightSpeed system, all of those involved in the decision process agree that two additional factors – service and training – led them to select GE Healthcare as their CT partner.



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On-site training critical

Dr. Rawson identified training as a major issue that could make or break the hospital's ability to successfully upgrade from single-slice to 16-slice CT. "This was going to be a big leap in technology," he says, "and we wanted to make sure we had good on-site training and that the vendor would commit to being here more than once."

The other CT provider being considered offered only off-site training for one technologist, says Hardy. In contrast GE Healthcare provided a three-day on-site training session for four Wills technologists and the applications specialist will return in the future for more training. "Being a small department, everyone here has to know how to do CT," says Hardy.

27% increase in volume

The BrightSpeed system was installed in April 2009. From January to March 2009, the hospital averaged 110 scans per month. During April and May – the first two months of BrightSpeed operation – patient volume rose to 147 scans per month. The difference, says Dr. Rawson, is greater diagnostic confidence.

"The system delivers far more images and they are of higher quality," he says. The sophistication of the scanner enabled the MCGHealth radiologists to prescribe protocols similar to the ones they use on their two GE 64-slice LightSpeed® VCT systems. The thin slices and fast scan speeds of the BrightSpeed system allow the hospital to do more arterial and vascular work, says Dr. Rawson, and to help readily identify clinical conditions such as pulmonary emboli, aortic dissections, and aneurysms.

"Ordering physicians are pleased to see sagittal and coronal reconstructions and have commented many times on the image quality," he says.

The "wow" factor

The hospital uses their BrightSpeed routinely for head studies, abdomen-pelvis studies with contrast, peripheral vascular exams, renal and adrenal studies, and spine and bony structure exams, according to technologist Elizabeth Hill, RT(R).

Hill says the speed of the system is remarkable and patients are noticing the difference. "Being a small hospital, we see many of the same patients, and they often comment, 'wow, this machine is really fast.'" Such speed, she says, is particularly helpful for patients who have trouble lying still or following directions, such as older patients and those with altered mental status. "It used to take up to 12 breath-holds to get through an abdomen study," she says. "Now one breath-hold and we're usually done."

Standing left to right, Stephanie Whiddon, Debra Hardy and Elizabeth Hill pictured with Wills Memorial Hospital's BrightSpeed system.



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Install on weekend, scan on Monday

Decommissioning the old scanner and implementing the BrightSpeed system was accomplished over a long weekend, says Hardy. The department shut down its single-slice scanner at Thursday noon and Wills' in-house maintenance staff prepared the room for the new scanner. "The GE team had the new system scanning by Saturday morning," says Hardy. "They promised us we would only be down three days, and we were." On Monday morning, the applications trainer arrived, and the department scanned a full schedule of patients that first day.

A recruiting advantage

Recruiting and retaining high quality physicians and employees is a "continuing battle" that all rural hospitals face, according to CEO Goldman. "Having an outdated single-slice CT was a negative," he says. "Now, when we are recruiting physicians, we can tell them we have an amazing state-of-the-art 16-slice CT system. That's a strong point in our favor." He says it also is stimulating to the imaging staff to work with new equipment, which will help in recruiting technicians.



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Keeping hospital and community strong

Wills Memorial plays a dual role in its community, says Goldman. "We are not only the provider of healthcare, we are the third largest employer in the community. That makes us a major component in the area's economic health," he says. As such, the hospital feels a significant responsibility to provide the best imaging services possible within the limits of its resources, says Goldman.

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GE Healthcare provides transformational medical technologies and services that are shaping a new age of patient care. Our broad expertise in medical imaging and information technologies, medical diagnostics, patient monitoring systems, drug discovery, biopharmaceutical manufacturing technologies, performance improvement and performance solutions services help our customers to deliver better care to more people around the world at a lower cost. In addition, we partner with healthcare leaders, striving to leverage the global policy change necessary to implement a successful shift to sustainable healthcare systems.

Our “healthymagination” vision for the future invites the world to join us on our journey as we continuously develop innovations focused on reducing costs, increasing access and improving quality and efficiency around the world.

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