

Independent Hospitals Update



Image courtesy of Hoefler Wysocki Architects



“MRI needs to be readily available to your patient base. If you make your patients go out of town for these procedures, you’re going to eventually lose them for everything.”

- Earl Sheehy, Chief Executive Officer

The right choice for your community: Making the decision to add MRI

In-house MRI keeps physicians happy and patients closer to home

Saunders Medical Center is an independent community hospital in Wahoo, Nebraska, a town of 4200 in the eastern part of the state. Looking at a map, if you drew the base of a triangle between Lincoln, the state capital, and Omaha, its largest city, Wahoo would sit at the apex, about 23 miles from either city.

This location is a significant factor in Saunders’ recent decision to acquire an in-house MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) system. Wahoo is changing. What was once primarily a farming community is now becoming a fast-growing suburb of Lincoln and Omaha, and home to an increasing number of commuters who work in the larger cities and surrounding towns.

Until recently, the Medical Center had been able to meet the community’s MRI needs with a mobile service that was onsite for five hours a week. But with Wahoo flourishing and MRI becoming a more widely used diagnostic test, the demand for exams has grown.

“MRI has become a state-of-the-art diagnostic tool for many types of conditions,” says Earl Sheehy, CEO of Saunders Medical Center. “We decided to make the investment in a fixed system in order to improve the quality of care we provide to patients and to make sure they don’t have to wait for an appointment or drive 20-plus miles to get an exam.”

Keeping patients closer to home

The primary focus of Saunders Medical Center is outpatient care. The Critical Access hospital includes full-service laboratory and radiology services, a 24-hour emergency room, physical and respiratory therapy and surgical services. A long-term care facility and a physician clinic are also part of the campus.

In 2005, the organization began planning for a new hospital that would double the amount of available space for patient care. The radiology department alone would be enlarged by nearly 75%.

At that time, it was also becoming obvious that the hospital needed an alternative to mobile MRI. According to Patrick Dailey, manager of imaging services, the primary reason was patient and physician satisfaction. “Ordering an MRI exam on Monday and having to wait until Saturday for the procedure is not an ideal situation for the physician or the patient. Having in-house MRI would allow us to provide service seven days a week if we needed to.”



Competition was another factor. As the demand for MRI services grew, so did the number of scanners in the surrounding communities. At present, there are at least nine fixed MRI systems within 30 miles of Wahoo, from hospital-based systems in Lincoln and Omaha to scanners in free-standing imaging centers.

"We knew we were losing a lot of patients to MRI services in the surrounding areas, facilities which offered longer hours and more flexibility in scheduling," says Dailey. "But why should a patient have to drive 25 miles for a procedure that we could do here, if we had our own scanner?"

Encouraging numbers

With plans for the new facility on the drawing board, hospital management floated the idea of acquiring an MRI system to the board, which then authorized a feasibility study. The numbers were encouraging, says Sheehy.

"We determined that about 42 procedures a month would pay for the acquisition and operating costs, as well as the structural expense to accommodate the scanner," he says. "We were already doing 35 procedures a month with the mobile service and physicians told us that they were referring another 30 to 40 patients a month to other facilities because of our scheduling difficulties. We knew that our volume would go up because physicians would utilize a system that was more convenient for their patients."

Bottom line? "We showed the board how in-house MRI would improve our ability to provide patients and physicians with better access to quality care. And from a financial perspective, the pro forma revealed that if we averaged just two exams a day, we could easily reach the volume that would justify the decision economically," says Sheehy.

Quality levels the playing field

The Medical Center team evaluated a variety of MR systems and manufacturers, and selected a Signa® HDe 1.5T MRI system from GE Healthcare. "Image quality was a key factor in choosing the HDe system," says Dailey. "I've also found from past experience working with physicians that they prefer images from a closed MR system versus those from an open scanner."

High performance and application flexibility were critical. The hospital wanted to offer a wider range of MRI procedures, such as neurological studies, and provide more advanced applications.



"Image quality was a key factor in choosing the HDe system."

Pat Dailey, Manager of Imaging Services

The Medical Center also leaned toward GE equipment because of their positive experience with a single-slice GE CT system that replaced their mobile CT service a few years earlier. "We've been very happy with that system. The patient volume exceeded our expectations and continues to increase monthly," says Dailey. In fact, the hospital plans to replace their single-slice unit with GE's 16-slice BrightSpeed system in the new facility, he said.

Virtually all of the imaging equipment that the Center uses is from GE Healthcare. "We've had a very good history with GE as far as service and technical support are concerned," says Dailey. "They're always dependable and willing to help us whenever we need them. That helped make the decision to choose GE very easy."

Sheehy says that acquiring a "state-of-the-art" HDe system from GE was also critical from a competitive standpoint. It enabled Saunders to "level the playing field" by offering the same MRI services as those available in larger medical facilities – so that patients and their physicians could be assured of receiving superior MRI without having to leave the community.



"Our staff is excited. Our physicians are excited. Our board is excited. Even the county board of supervisors is excited about it."

Earl Sheehy, Chief Executive Officer

Physician buy-in was immediate

Saunders Medical Center conducts approximately 6,000 imaging procedures a year. Their imaging services include radiography, CT, ultrasound, screening and diagnostic mammography, MRI, nuclear medicine, bone densitometry and echocardiography. The hospital also has a full service laboratory, a 24 hour emergency department and 16 swing beds.

Radiology studies, except for mammograms, are read remotely by a group of board-certified radiologists based in Omaha. Images are transmitted digitally via PACS to the radiologists. Their dictated reports are transcribed at the hospital and distributed to the physicians.

The Medical Center's primary medical staff consists of six physicians and two physician assistants who live and practice in the Wahoo area. Referrals also come from approximately 15 specialists who are based in the surrounding communities.

The physicians "bought into the idea of in-house MRI the minute we started looking at it," says Sheehy.

The hospital intends to offer the service five days a week in the beginning and add evenings and weekends in the future, based on demand.

One clinical area that particularly influenced the decision to move to in-house MRI was orthopedics, says Dailey. Athletic injuries and other orthopedic conditions dominate the hospital's current MRI case mix. "We have an orthopedic surgeon who holds a weekly clinic at the hospital. There were procedures that he wanted done sooner – and now we'll be able to have the exams done when he wants them," says Dailey.



"A detachable table can help save a life."

Rachele Malousek, MRI Technologist

Guidance during construction

GE provided valuable input to the Center during facility planning and construction, says Dailey. "They partnered very well with us, providing all the necessary specs and maintaining close contact with

the construction managers and architects to make sure everything was installed properly." It's critical, he says, to have everyone "on the same page" during facility planning to avoid problems and ensure a successful MR implementation.

From a technologist's perspective

Recruiting technologists to operate the new system has "not been an issue," according to Sheehy. "We actually have two that already have MRI experience."

One of them is Rachele Malousek, RT. She sees a number of advantages to replacing their mobile MRI service with a fixed system. "Patients who have a spine injury or a possible stroke need MRI right away. They can't wait for a mobile service or to be transferred 30 miles away. Now, we'll be able to take care of them right away."

She says there will be more time for personalized care, to take better patient histories and visit with patients because technologists won't have to rush against the clock, trying to get all the cases through in the few hours the mobile system is on-site. Malousek also feels that the hospital will be better able to stay current with the latest MRI protocols and that turnaround time for reports will be reduced, improving patient care.



The benefits of a detachable table

Malousek is particularly pleased that the hospital selected a Signa HDe system. A key reason is its unique detachable table. "A detachable table can help save a life," she says. "If a patient codes or needs help immediately, you just unhook the table and bring the patient outside the magnet room for assistance."

A detachable table also reduces the number of steps in preparing a patient for an exam, says Malousek. "You just move the patient from the bed onto the table, take them to the imaging room and scan them. It eliminates having to transfer patients onto a cart. That saves time and contributes to greater patient comfort."

Just push a little button

Malousek has worked with GE systems in the past and feels they are "very user friendly and easy to learn. I've trained with GE before and someone is always there to help you, going over the protocols and explaining the software. It's very reassuring to have someone behind you all the way."

One support tool that Malousek has come to depend on is iLinq™ – an exclusive GE service feature that enables users to communicate with GE applications specialists by simply touching a button on the operator console. "If you're ever stuck trying to figure out something that's happening with the system, you just push the little button. A GE person always gets back to you within 10 to 15 minutes and usually is able to resolve the issue. It's very, very cool."

The community is excited

Saunders Medical Center expects their new GE Signa HDe system to be installed and operational by August 2007. "We're convinced it was the right decision because we've heard back from the community how grateful they are that we're adding a fixed MRI system," says Sheehy. "Our staff is excited. Our physicians are excited. Our board is excited. Even the county board of supervisors is excited about it."

Sheehy believes that having in-house MRI is essential for an independent community hospital to provide state-of-the-art medicine today – and to continue thriving. "MRI needs to be readily available to your patient base. If you make your patients go out of town for these procedures, you're going to eventually lose them for everything."

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