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MAHEC programs move to new location

Biltmore campus renamed for Mary C. Nesbitt

by Julie Ball

At MAHEC's old facility on Weaver Boulevard, a lunch room doubled as a classroom and meeting space. "We used to have to kick staff out of the commons area so that we could actually have a meeting of more than 10 people," said Dr. Steve Hulkower, director of Family Medicine for the Mountain Area Health Education Center.

This summer, MAHEC's Family Health Center moved to a new location on Hendersonville Road that doubled the clinic space and for the first time put its family medicine and dental health residents and faculty on the same campus with its ob-gyn program. The newest 42,000-square-foot building houses both the Family Health Center and MAHEC Dental Health Center.

On Wednesday, MAHEC will host an open house and a ceremony to rename the campus in honor of Mary C. Nesbitt, who served in the General Assembly in the 1970s. A teacher for 29 years and the mother of current state Sen. Martin Nesbitt, Nesbitt joined the North Carolina House in 1974. She died in 1979 while serving a third term.

Reps. Susan Fisher, Nathan Ramsey and Tim Moffitt co-sponsored legislation to honor Mary Nesbitt by renaming the MAHEC Biltmore campus.

"She (Mary Nesbitt) helped secure funding for the original MAHEC efforts" said Dr. Jeffery Heck, MAHEC president and CEO. Mary Nesbitt's daughter, Mary Ann N. Dotson-Silvey, also donated land for a MAHEC family health center in Lake Lure, and Martin Nesbitt was among the lawmakers who helped secure some state dollars for the Biltmore campus.

The Mountain Area Health Education Center began in 1974 as part of an effort to train more doctors for rural areas. Site work for the new campus began in 2008. The first two buildings opened in 2011. That included the building that houses the obstetrics program and a second education building that houses the N.C. Center for Healthy Aging, a collaborative effort with MAHEC, UNC Asheville and Western Carolina University.

Work on a third building to house dental and family medicine began in the spring of 2012. The total cost of the campus was \$32 million. The state provided \$9.3 million for the Center for Healthy Aging.

"It's a very great improvement from the last building," said Jasmine Hanks, who brought her daughter in for a check-up recently. Between dental, ob/gyn and family medicine, MAHEC has about 100,000 patient visits a year. All those services are in the same location for the first time.

"What's really exciting to see is you see patients who are seen over at (obstetrics) that need a medical visit or need an X-ray or something that walk over here, get that part of their care, or maybe go to the dental office for their care," Heck said. "Of course because we're also an academic institution, that closeness gives us much more opportunities for brainstorming and sharing ideas and educational efforts for our students and residents. It's an academic health center. It's basically UNC West."

The Dental Health Center includes two additional treatment rooms, said Dr. Bill Ryals, director of Dental Health. "We went from 10 treatment rooms to 12," Ryals said. A grant from the Duke Endowment helped equip the rooms.

The Family Health Center has 34 exam rooms and three procedure rooms. It includes two "group visit" rooms that can accommodate groups of patients at one time. The group rooms allow a doctor to meet with multiple patients. One example might be a group of pregnant women in for a prenatal visit or a group of patients all suffering from asthma. "It turns out that the patients actually act as a support group for each other," Hulkower said.

The clinic also includes specially equipped geriatric rooms to accommodate older patients with things like non-slip floors and an elevated chair.

Heck said plans originally called for just the ob/gyn program to relocate to the new campus, but construction costs dropped during the economic downturn, and MAHEC was able to add a third building to house both family health and dental. "By consolidating the two buildings we actually got a lovely space, and for less cost, which is really important nowadays," Heck said.

Like other health care providers, MAHEC has been hit by the federal sequester. Over the last year, MAHEC has cut seven full-time positions, Heck said. "We've had to make some reductions in order to be lean enough for the reductions in payments for health services," he said.

The sequester cut Medicare reimbursements. The state's decision not to expand Medicaid is also affecting MAHEC. "That expansion of Medicaid would have made a really big difference for us," Heck said. Expanding Medicaid would mean "all the uninsured people that we take care of, suddenly those people have insurance," he said. Heck said he hopes the state will eventually expand Medicaid. "I'm hoping they will make what they feel are necessary modifications to Medicaid and then they will proceed with expanding Medicaid," Heck said.



Nayada Hanks, 5, gets a checkup from Dr. Bart Steen, MAHEC resident, while her mother Jasmine looks on at the new Family Health Center. Robert Bradley / rabradle@gannett.com