MERI Works to Become World-Renowned Training Facility

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TOM WILEMON | The Daily News

The reach of the Medical Education and Research Institute expands far beyond the former post office it occupies on Cleveland Avenue.

The largest surgical training center in the country using donor bodies, MERI has taught new procedures in the past year to more than 9,500 physicians from the United States and abroad. Their visits and other business generated by MERI will bring an estimated $54 million into the Memphis economy, said Elizabeth Ostric, the institute's executive director.

PETRI DISH: Doctors, nurses, medical students and other health care professionals learn about the latest surgical procedures with the aid of donor bodies and human patient simulators at the Medical Education & Research Institute in Memphis. -- PHOTO COURTESY OF MERI

Beyond its core mission of medical education, MERI also has become a community partner for emergency preparedness.

On Thursday, it will host a training exercise for emergency responders using human patient simulators, mannequins that can be used in learning life-saving procedures.

Safe, not sorry

This exercise, which will create the scenario of a bombing disaster, is the first of six that will occur into the first quarter of next year. Thursday's exercise will involve the Memphis fire and police departments.

"They are doing hands-on training and are actually going to simulate a bombing disaster," Ostric said. "So the SWAT team is coming, the police department is coming and 50 EMTs and paramedics will come. They will practice airway management for part of the day. The rest of the day they will practice search and recovery.

"With our electronic patient simulators, they will actually get a chance to resuscitate simulated patients who have been in a bombing disaster."

The disaster training courses for Shelby County emergency responders are funded by a grant from the Plough Foundation and financial support from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Metropolitan Medical Response System Program.

The human patient simulators were paid for with part of a $1 million grant from the Assisi Foundation of Memphis. MERI has nine of the simulators.

“In addition to that, we are acquiring some special attachments so they can look like they’ve been in traumatic accidents,” Ostric said. “Some of them look like they’ve been shot. Some of them look like they’ve been in an explosion.”

Seeking donations

Solid financial support for MERI has helped keep Memphis at the forefront of medical innovations since the training center opened in the old post office in 1994. Its primary benefactors are Baptist Memorial Health Care, Methodist Le Bonheur Healthcare and Semmes Murphey Neurologic and Spine Institute.

During the past year, MERI has raised about $1.7 million. The institute began a $10 million capital fund drive about two years ago, but has since changed its fundraising strategy to make it a continuing annual effort.

“We have been given a lot of different (types of) donations,” Ostric said. “Some have been cash so we could finance the refurbishment of this building and make for more lab space so that we could actually train more students.”

Companies have also loaned training equipment, such as a da Vinci robotic surgical system and an O-arm, a system manufactured by Medtronic Inc. that allows simultaneous multidimensional monitoring during surgical procedures.

“Our vision is to be the leading hands-on medical education and training institute in the world,” Ostric said. “It’s important to keep that new technology coming all the time.”

Last year, MERI spent $700,000 to expand its 27,000-square-foot facility with another 2,000 square feet. This year, it purchased an adjacent building at 1381 Madison for $800,000.

The city of Memphis within the past month approved plans to reroute an alley between MERI and the adjacent building so a parking lot can be expanded and gated.

“What we will eventually do is we will knock down that building,” Ostric said. “As donations and tuition permit, we will actually expand our teaching facilities there.”

The building, which currently functions as storage space, will be used in Thursday’s training exercise. All three stories of the MERI building are built out.

But the immediate wish list is for equipment rather than new buildings.

“What we’re working on now is hopefully getting on loan or donated a neuroangiography suite so that we can begin to assist in the type of work that physicians do to assist stroke

patients," Ostric said. "You have to have some very specific imaging equipment to be able to do that. That is a procedure done under imaging.

"They are actually able to remove blockages, and that can lead to much better patient outcomes. We are looking for donations for that."

The accolades

People who choose to donate their bodies to science allow continuing education and medical innovations to take place.

MERI has frozen donor cadavers, which are considered better for testing procedures than embalmed bodies.

The donor bodies allow medical device companies to test new inventions for knee replacements, spinal procedures and other surgical innovations. The donor bodies also help in training new health care professionals.

"The MERI this year gave away $140,000 in free hands-on education to places like the University of Tennessee Health Science Center so that their surgical residents could have their first surgical experience with our atomic donor support," Ostric said.

MERI also supports the medical teaching missions of the University of Memphis, the Southern College of Optometry and area nursing schools, she said.

MERI employs 44 people.

"Our staff members got a 99 percent student satisfaction rating this year," Ostric said. "They got more than 500 individual compliments from the people who are coming here for training because they do a great job. We're really proud of the work they do."