

# MERI Begins \$10M Capital Campaign

Wednesday, March 11, 2009



**TESTING INNOVATIONS:** Physicians learn about a new surgical procedure with the help of a donor cadaver at the Medical Education & Research Institute. -- PHOTO COURTESY OF MERI

**TOM WILEMON | The Daily News**

The Medical Education & Research Institute, which helps physicians learn about the latest surgical techniques and medical device advances, has begun a \$10 million capital fund drive as it seeks to expand its mission and upgrade its technologies.

The nonprofit organization has helped Memphis stay at the forefront of medical innovations since it opened in 1994 in an old post office at [44 S. Cleveland St.](#), but the more than 9,400 doctors who receive continuing education from MERI come from throughout the United States and abroad.

This is the place where they learn about new techniques for knee replacements, spinal procedures and other minimally invasive surgeries. It's also where companies test out medical devices. MERI provides training to students in health care-related fields, including nurses and emergency medical technicians.

People who choose to donate their bodies to science allow the continuing education and medical innovations to take place. At MERI, the health care professionals use frozen donor cadavers to test procedures instead of embalmed bodies. The institute has also added human patient simulators, expensive mannequins that health care professionals use to learn life-saving procedures.

The education mission has about a \$45 million economic impact, according to a study by the University of Memphis, but MERI's presence in Memphis helps the city recruit biomedical companies.

“We are having a major increase in companies coming to Memphis, and we are trying to play a big role in the biomedical device and research industry within the community,” said Elizabeth Ostric, executive director of MERI. “Beyond that, MERI’s vision is to be the leading hands-on, medical education and training institute in the world. In order to do that, we have to have the tools here – the very latest tools for health care providers to practice with.”

### **Tools of the trade**

MERI last year spent \$700,000 to expand its 27,000-square-foot facility with another 2,000 square feet on the east side of the building. It also purchased human patient simulators with the help of a \$500,000 grant from the The Assisi Foundation of [Memphis Inc.](#)

The MERI’s primary benefactors are Baptist Memorial Health Care, Methodist Le Bonheur Healthcare and Semmes Murphey Neurologic and Spine Institute.

[Diana Kelly](#), the manager of institutional development for MERI, said the facility provides the environment for training for more than 100 medical device companies.

“We’re actually the largest hands-on medical training facility for minimally invasive surgery, we believe, in the U.S.,” Kelly said. “We’re one of the first, and we believe we’re still the largest.”

About 600 donors give their bodies to MERI each year.

“We are very appreciative of that gift,” Kelly said. “It is a gift for someone to make that decision to donate their body to science. It’s a wonderful gift. We treat them very much with respect here.”

In appreciation for that gift, MERI provides \$600 to families to go toward memorial services or to go to a charity of the family’s choice. The typical length of stay for a donor is six to nine months. At the end of that period, the remains are cremated and either sent to the family or placed in a mausoleum.

“We also send the family a letter about all the different procedures that their loved one has been involved in,” Kelly said. “We can tell them how many physicians their loved one helped train and the types of procedures. It really gives them a sense that this was a valuable thing to do.

“I’m not too sure that many donor programs do that, but we want that family to feel good about the decision that their loved one made. It kind of really helps bring closure to the family. That’s probably the best thing we do that the family really appreciates.”

### **Practice makes perfect**

However, some information is closely guarded. Medical device companies want to keep innovations secret from competitors. MERI sometimes takes a donor and equipment to a remote location for training.

Weekends are the busiest times at MERI when surgeons come for continuing education. About 50 people work at the institute.

The human patient simulators are allowing MERI to broaden its mission. Four rooms are now equipped with six simulators, including a birthing neonate, two adult wireless, a pediatric wireless and an infant simulator. These are used to help train medical students and emergency responders.

Although MERI focuses on minimally invasive surgical techniques, because this has been an area of medical advancement in recent years, it has the environment for training in all medical specialties. The center is also equipped with video conferencing technology.

However, the most vital service MERI provides is physician training.

“I want to make sure when I have a surgical procedure that the physician who does my procedure has done it a few times and is trained, and I have that comfort level that he is up to speed on the latest and greatest minimally invasive surgical techniques,” Kelly said. “The only way they can do to that is to come to someplace like the MERI and practice.”