

State's smallest hospital faces challenges, tackles expansion Ione students learning through experience

Editor's Note: This article ran in the September issue of the online magazine CareNews.

From the hill on the east side of Heppner, Pioneer Memorial Hospital has a birds-eye view of the Morrow County seat.

Molly Rhea, director of nursing services, looks out of the glassless window frame on the hospital's south side. From here, you can see most of the town and most of the homes for its 1,400 residents.

Right down there, she says, a few blocks from the courthouse, is the house where she grew up. On that hill over there, a little west and north of downtown, is the high school she attended before going away to nursing school.

You can't see it from this window, but just south of town and slightly east is Willow Creek Dam, the world's first roller-compacted concrete dam. And just outside the window of Molly's office on the floor below, a family of quail gathers on the lawn for lunch. These windows will give a nice view for the residents and staff when the new seven-bed long-term nursing wing is finished.

Once home to a 32-bed nursing home, this wing of the hospital closed in 2003 after years of losses. The Morrow County Health District, which owns and operates the hospital, is rebuilding the wing with eight beds for the nursing home that can do double duty as licensed hospital beds. The designation will bring the district a higher rate of compensation.

"We won't break even, but we'll be within \$40,000," says Hospital Administrator Victor Vander Does. "Before we were anywhere from \$200,000 to \$400,000 of losses every year."

The new nursing wing is a bright spot and a source of pride for Victor, Molly and the rest of the

staff (30-some at the hospital, many with shared duties with the Health District, which employs 70 full time). But the wing also demonstrates the challenges of operating a hospital in a town small enough that you can point out all the landmarks from a single window.

Small town pluses...

In many ways, there are advantages to living in a small town. A five-minute commute all the way across town certainly is worthy of envy. And it's nice to be able to greet every person on the street by name.

"I think we have to be more polite, because we see these people all the time," says Molly, a lifelong Heppner resident who gained her big-city experience while studying nursing at Portland's Good Samaritan Hospital.

And the old axiom about being considered a newcomer for the first 30 or 40 years of residency doesn't quite hold up like it used to, she says.

"We're quick to welcome you because we need more people," Molly says. Having new people means some of the burdens of community can be shared.

Take Molly and her husband. Steve is a descendant of Oregon Trail pioneers and an insurance agent. He's been on the city budget committee, is Heppner's volunteer assistant fire chief and for weeks this summer was in California working as a firefighter. Molly is the Lion's Club secretary, is active at the Methodist Church, used to be a coach and still yells encouragement from the sideline.

...and small hospital challenges

At the hospital, everyone pulls double, triple, even quadruple duty.

The administrator, Victor Vander Does, sometimes works as a volunteer ambulance driver (usually on St. Patrick's Day, he says). Molly, the director of

nursing services, also heads up home health and hospice, and is a backup nurse in the emergency room.

"Some days, when you get busy, all your plans for big projects just have to be pushed aside," she says.

In lieu of a security staff, nurses keep an eye on the monitor that acts as a security system.

That's sometimes an advantage. Just from that single glimpse on the monitor, many times the nurse will recognize who's coming in for urgent care, know what crop they were bringing in that day and what pulled muscle is likely to be the diagnosis.

More often, the small town presents real challenges for services, structure and staff, Victor says. So the hospital makes adjustments and makes do.

Pioneer Memorial no longer does surgeries or handles childbirth. There weren't nearly enough surgeries and births to keep obstetricians, surgeons and anesthesiologists busy, so they had to drive in from Hermiston or Pendleton. Now surgical patients and mothers in labor make that hour-long trip in the opposite direction. But in the space left vacant by these services, the hospital now houses administration as well as a CT scanner and digital X-ray. That means fewer trips out of town for trauma patients to follow up on suspicious neck injuries or possible skull fractures. Just like reopening the long-term nursing wing means families won't have to travel out of town for visits.

Size definitely makes a difference when it comes to finding staff, Molly says.

"I try to play the small town up as a good thing, but finding qualified people is hard," she says.

Many nurses, for example, enjoy the professional challenge of handling additional duties that large

hospitals have specialists doing. But most don't want to have janitorial duties also, or to live an hour from the nearest movie theater and other cultural niceties.

A lot of times, the best place to find people is right at home, Molly says. There are other home-town kids like her who've gone off to school but want to come home. And there are relatives of people already on staff.

"We do OK with attracting providers," Victor says. Two new doctors came on board just in the last year: Betsy Anderson, MD, came from Corvallis, and Russell Nichols, MD, came from John Day. Both are primary care and emergency room physicians.

But many physicians spend only a few years, having signed on to a federal program that places physicians in rural communities in exchange for reduced debt for medical school. Once their obligation is complete, many will move on.

Quality improvement in small town practice

Medical care in the United States is under tremendous pressure to reduce costs and improve quality. That's where some of the greatest challenges lie for rural hospitals.

"My frustration is that we have so many requirements and there are so few of us," Molly says.

It would be nice if there were enough staff to have someone who could do infection control as their primary duty.

It would be nice to have electronic medical records so that medical reconciliation wouldn't be such a difficult issue.

It would be nice if the director of nursing services/home health and hospice director didn't also have to be the quality improvement department.

But then it wouldn't be a small hospital.



Photos Top to Bottom: Alex Fetteroff is intent on knot tying. Loren Heideman helps Cory Peterson and Alex Rietmann tie knots. Gunner Jessen gets a knot tying lesson from Loren Heideman. Kristi Crowell talks about proper pony care when handling carts. In the background are students (L-R) JJ Dixon, Dennis Schmidt, Tanner Rietmann, Brianna Peterson and Hailey Arbogast. Dennis Schmidt and Tom Holland learn proper grooming techniques from guest presenter, Lori Rice. -Contributed Photos

Sheriff's Report

The Morrow County Sheriff's Office reports handling the following business:

July 8 cont.: -BPD issued a citation to Sebastian Ramirez Bernal, 24, for no operator's license and driving uninsured.

-BPD issued a citation to Leobardo Orozco Vivian, 21, for no operator's license and obstructed window.

-BPD arrested Michael Wayne Hoston, 38, for driving while suspended.

-BPD received a report from a caller that there are kids on bikes going out into traffic.

-BPD received a report from a caller that while he was in the hospital he residence was broken into, his cell phone and some cash were missing.

-BPD received a report that a male subject is giving rivers inappropriate hand signals to vehicles on the freeway.

-BPD arrested Dustin Reed Harper, 32, for driving while suspended.

-BPD received a report from a caller that there are 4 or 5 kids that are jumping on the hood of a car and driving around with their feet.

-MCSO received a report of a fire on the upper end of Big Butter Creek. The

fire was determined to be in the Pilot Rock district.

-MCSO received a report from a caller in Heppner that there was a fire. The small fire was put out.

-Irrigon ambulance received a report that a mother fell.

July 9: -MCSO received a report from a caller in Irrigon requesting extra patrol due to semi trucks and 10 wheelers traveling fast up and down the road.

-MCSO received a report from a caller in Ione that two of his antique gas pumps had been stolen.

-BPD received a report from a caller that there was a vehicle in the grass at a rest area. A deputy made contact and advised him to move the vehicle.

-MCSO deputy helped to assist a subject in starting there vehicle due to the battery being dead.

-MCSO received a report from a caller in Irrigon that her kids had been bit by the neighbor's dog. The caller made contact with the neighbor's and asked them to take care of the problem, but they refused to do anything about it.

-BPD received a report from a caller that heard two gun shots.

-MCSO received a report from a caller in Irrigon that there were a bunch of kids up by the river with a bon fire and possibly drinking.

-BPD received a re-

port from a caller that there is someone doing cookies for about five minutes and would like someone to check it out.

-BPD arrested Shawna Faye Hahn, 38, for unlawful possession of methamphetamine. Subject was lodged at Umatilla County Jail.

-BPD arrested Edward Charles McGinnis, 41, for unlawful possession of methamphetamine. Subject was lodged at Umatilla County Jail.

-BPD arrested Michael Anthony Mullikin, 24, for criminal mischief. Subject was lodged at Umatilla County Jail.

-Boardman ambulance received a call from a male subject that said his wife is sick, but the wife says she is fine and did not want them to respond.

-Irrigon Fire Department received a report that there was a fire near the grain elevators. The fire Department was unable to locate the fire in that area.

-Irrigon Ambulance received a report from a female caller that her 80 year old grandmother is having some sort of a reaction to some medications.

July 10: -MCSO received a report that there was a motorcycle accident involving a male subject with a broken ankle.

-MCSO issued a citation to Phillip Arthur Pringle, 52, for violation of

the basic rule for 73 mph in a 55 mph speed zone.

-MCSO received a report from a caller that there was a vehicle driving up and down the beach. The subject(s) left a bunch of beer cans and a fire burning.

-MCSO received a report from a caller in Heppner that said someone had left several horses in the pen at the fairgrounds without food and water and was wondering if someone had called in to say they were leaving them there.

-MCSO received a report from a caller in Heppner that a male subject came in and was very upset and making statements concerning his neighbor's home.

-MCSO received a report from a caller in Hermiston that advised that there was a truck that was driving all over the road.

-BPD issued a citation to Luis Gerardo Cadenas Nunez, 21, for violation of the basic rule.

-MCSO issued a citation to a female subject for violation of the speed limit of 48 mph in a 35 mph speed limit.

-MSCO received a report from a caller in Irrigon advising that the trucks going up and down the road are causing severe dust problems and would like them to spray the road or use a different access road.

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