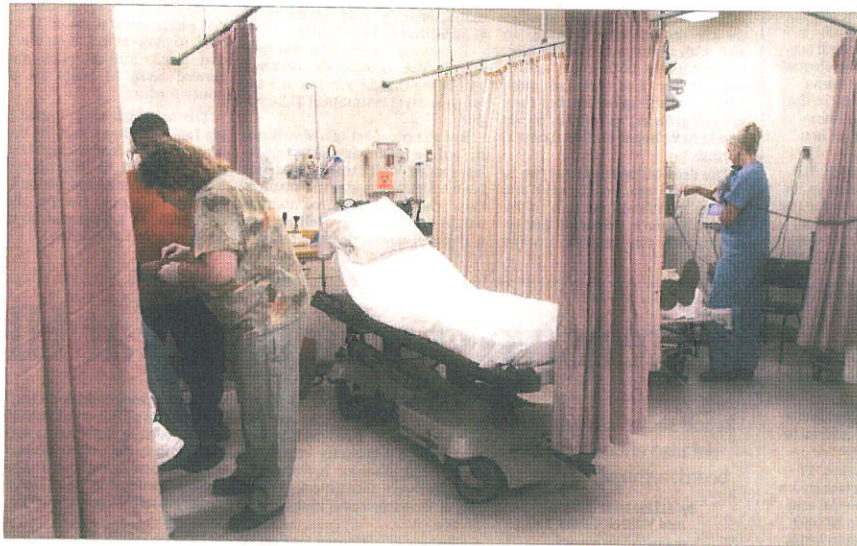


The Press

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Business



KENT PORTER / The Press Democrat
 Nurse practitioner Sherri Pether, second left, interviews a patient as outpatient nurse Cher Ares, right, attends to another Friday in Healdsburg Hospital's emergency room. The 900-square-foot facility is being replaced by a 4,600-square-foot building.

New ER in works for Healdsburg Hospital

Generosity of local couple helps make longtime dream of expanding small facility a reality

By CAROL BENFELL
 THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

In six months, doctors will no longer be forced to shuffle patients in Healdsburg Hospital's tiny emergency room or put them temporarily out in the hall because all the beds are full.

Thanks to a benefactor, the hospital has broken ground on a new \$3 million emergency room to replace the aging 900-square-foot facility built in 1972.

"This is cause for celebration," said Walt Maack, medical director of Healdsburg's emergency room for the past 28 years. "The place is going to be five times the size of the current emergency room, and it will be easier to take care of patients. We won't have to constantly shuffle peo-



Ed Villarreal of Sonoma Engineering cuts asphalt Friday in preparation for a new \$3 million emergency room being erected at the hospital.

ple or have people lying in the hall."

It wouldn't have happened, Maack said, without a \$2 million donation from Maggie and Harry Wetzel, a Healdsburg couple who have lived in the area since 1962.

Hospital doctors and administrators have talked for 20 years about upgrading the emergency room, but until now, the money was never

there, Maack said.

"If it weren't for these generous donors, we'd still be waiting for the money. After all these false starts, it's really happening," Maack said.

The emergency room at Healdsburg Hospital is considered key to patient care in northern Sonoma

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County. Without it, patients in outlying areas would have to travel to Santa Rosa, a trip that could take two to three times as long, depending on the unpredictable traffic on Highway 101.

The Healdsburg emergency room receives about 10,000 patient visits a year and serves 50,000 people in Windsor, Healdsburg, Geyserville, Cloverdale and surrounding areas.

The current emergency room has state-of-the-art medical equipment but provides only minimal patient privacy and not much room for staff to work, said Evan Rayner, the hospital's chief executive officer.

The 900-square-foot department has four beds, separated from each other only by curtains. The new emergency room will be 4,600 square feet, with eight beds in private rooms. The design will shield patients from the sights and sounds of the emergency room.

"We have had to close the emergency room when we got emotionally upset patients because we didn't have the privacy they needed," Maack said. "We won't have to do that anymore."

As well as private patient rooms, the new department will include patient telemonitoring so specialists at the University of California or elsewhere can consult with local doctors if needed. A tracking system will be installed that signals nurses as soon as lab results or other patient information comes in.

The building will be of modular construction, the first modular emergency room in California, Rayner said. The building panels will be fabricated in Los Angeles, then trucked to Healdsburg and put together at the site.

Because it's modular, Rayner expects the emergency room to open its doors to patients in March.

"It's cheaper, and it's certainly faster," Rayner said. "It cuts building time by rough-

ly 35 percent."

Construction of the new emergency room also marks a financial turnaround for Healdsburg Hospital, which has seen its share of troubled times.

The hospital, founded in 1908, was locally owned until 1972, when it was sold to a Santa Monica medical group. It passed through the hands of eight corporate owners in the next 26 years. Columbia/HCA Corp. was set to close the hospital in 1998, when a group of local investors stepped in and bought the facility for \$3.7 million.

In 2001, voters created the North Sonoma County Hospital District to manage the hospital and approved an \$85 annual parcel tax to help with the funding. The tax, since raised to \$150 a year, contributes about \$3.3 million a year toward the district's \$45 million annual budget.

The Wetzels, who founded Alexander Valley Vineyards, made their donation to the nonprofit Health Care Foundation Northern Sonoma County, which is in the midst of fundraising for Healdsburg Hospital and the Alliance Medical Center, a community clinic.

The Wetzels had not earmarked the donation for a specific project, but the foundation realized that here at last was the money to rebuild the emergency room, said Marian Van Alyea, foundation vice president.

In gratitude to the Wetzels, the new emergency department will be named after them in a private dedication ceremony in late October, Van Alyea said.

Harry Wetzel said through a spokeswoman that he and his wife were delighted their gift will be used for something so important to the community.

"We wanted to do something that would bring great benefit to our friends and neighbors," Wetzel said. "We're pleased that our gift will make an immediate, positive impact on our town."