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## University Hospital's latest challenge

*By Cliff Peale*

**CORRYVILLE** - Air Care helicopters leave University Hospital hundreds of times a year, bound for emergencies from Burlington to Batavia.

Every flight carries a pilot, a nurse and an emergency doctor. They return to the Level I trauma center with survivors of the worst fires and traffic accidents, with double trauma teams waiting to treat the most complicated cases.

"What we do," says the emergency department's Brian Gibler, "is bring intensive care out to the patients."

But those services don't come cheap. Air Care costs the hospital \$2.5 million a year.

Those kinds of special services, and the millions of dollars they cost, have put University Hospital at the locus of the board room disputes roiling many of the region's biggest hospitals.

With its health system breaking up, University wants other hospitals, doctors and patients throughout Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky to help pay the bill.

University Hospital has carved a niche in the most critical - and expensive - treatments to patients. It is the region's biggest teaching hospital, the primary safety-net hospital for those who can't afford medical care, the only top-level trauma center and the focus for specialized services such as care for stroke victims.

It also pays nearly \$50 million a year to support UC Physicians and the University of Cincinnati's College of Medicine, the region's only medical school.

Supporters say if the hospital is left isolated by the breakup of the Health Alliance of Greater Cincinnati, it won't be able to invest in century-old buildings or recruit the best doctors. They want to delay the merger of Jewish Hospital and Mercy Health Partners until University Hospital can secure funding from other providers around the region.

Jewish and Mercy acknowledge University Hospital's special place but say any solution has to include all of the region's health-care institutions, not just them.

They say University posted a \$19 million surplus last year and could collect tens of millions of dollars in cash if West Chester Medical Center, another alliance hospital, is sold to the highest

bidder.

UC also is offering \$50,000 payments to recruit alliance doctors into a new primary-care group.

"It kind of helps the public understand they aren't broke, and they do have resources," Mercy CEO Jim May says.

Other hospitals also point out that University Hospital is the region's only adult hospital to receive taxpayer money - \$26 million a year through a Hamilton County tax levy - for indigent care.

"Yes, University Hospital is special," says Leonard Randolph, chief medical officer at Mercy. "That mission is rightfully recognized by special subsidies to help sustain it."

Meanwhile, doctors and nurses at University Hospital remain focused on a mission that differentiates it from every other hospital.

Dan Flora, a second-year internal medicine resident originally from Milford, routinely spends 16-hour days caring for more than 100 patients.

"It's tough," he says. "These people have very complex medical issues, something you'd never find in a community hospital. There are days you go home and feel like you've fought a battle, but you also feel like you've done a lot of good."