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Services like nothing else

Cliff Peale

There is, Dale Ankenman said, no such thing as minor brain surgery. That's why he's glad he went to University Hospital.

Doctors there drilled two holes in the Florence resident's skull in June 2008 as part of deep brain stimulation to treat the symptoms of his Parkinson's disease.

"It's made my life a lot better," said Ankenman, 53, an engineer for Duke Energy. "My ability to do things was tailing off. They gave me my life back."

That kind of specialized neurological care has become one of the calling cards at University Hospital. With the research and teaching resources of the University of Cincinnati next door, the sickest patients from all over Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky are brought to the Corryville hospital.

- [Photos: University Hospital through the years](#)
- [University Hospital articles of incorporation, 1996](#)
- [Health Alliance settlement, 2003](#)
- [University Hospital report to Hamilton County, 2009](#)

Some, like Ankenman, are facing life-altering surgery and require the most delicate of operations.

Those in a serious house fire or highway accident are carried by Air Care to the rooftop pad at University.

And others, such as Misty Moore of Cheviot, need the double trauma teams that University Hospital keeps on hand at all times, a service unique among the region's hospitals.

Moore suffered a heart attack while in labor in August 2008 and spent more than nine hours overnight in double surgeries before her baby was delivered safely.

"I believe had I gone somewhere else that day, I would not be here today," said Moore, now 27.

Those services are only part of the mission at University, which also serves as the primary teaching hospital for UC's College of Medicine and the safety-net hospital for residents of the urban core who can't afford their own medical care.

Now the hospital says that mission is in danger with the breakup of the Health Alliance of Greater Cincinnati. Formed in the mid-1990s, that group includes Jewish, University and Fort Hamilton hospitals, the Drake Center and West Chester Medical Center.

But Jewish and Fort Hamilton are withdrawing, leaving University Hospital on its own.

Supporters say they need a bigger system to help finance the missions and services that only University Hospital provides. Without that system, they say they need tens of millions of dollars in subsidies from other hospitals around the region.

Without that money, they say, their ability to recruit the most talented doctors who provide that specialized care and trauma services will be compromised.

Most of the region's other hospitals acknowledge the services that University Hospital provides. But they are trying to balance their own budgets and reluctant to subsidize operations at a competitor.

Among University Hospital's services with a regional footprint, Air Care is only one example. Each flight includes a nurse and an emergency doctor, and the service loses \$2.5 million a year.

"We believe it helps us deliver better care, but it does drive up our costs," said Lee Ann Liska, top executive at the hospital.

The top-level programs, meant to keep patients with the most complicated medical problems from seeking care in other cities, are done in partnership with UC, which also stands to lose if University Hospital loses its financial viability.

UC is raising hundreds of millions of dollars in private money to try to establish centers of excellence in cancer, diabetes and obesity, cardiovascular disease and neuroscience. Many of those researchers will teach or practice at University Hospital, giving it a niche that community hospitals around the region don't replicate.

Ankenman certainly is glad University had the expertise he needed.

"It's very precise," he said of his surgery. "You just can't go anywhere and get your brain operated on."