

SPINAL CORD INJURIES

Spine Academy seeks to change the face of backbone care

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Here's how spinal care currently works in Charlotte County: It's like going to a restaurant for an appetizer, then having to find another restaurant for the main course. Then you have to go to yet another place that specializes in desserts. You have to make reservations for all of them — and there's usually a wait. There's no one location to sit down and have a full meal. Charlotte Regional Medical Center (CRMC), Punta Gorda, is looking to change that with its upcoming Spine Academy, slated to open in August.

"The concept is a 'one-stop shop,' if you will," said P.J. Floyd, director of the academy, as well as CRMC's med/surg unit and Joint Academy. "It's a very holistic approach to patient care."

One thing she and others connected with the unit agree on: There's nothing like it available in the county now.

The journey to a destination The concept for the Spine Academy did not originate here, but is based on a nationally successful model created by Marshall Steele, MD. His Chicago-based organization assists healthcare facilities in creating "Destination Centers of Superior Performance." The physician developed the idea in 1995, in order to correct what he saw as inefficiencies in patient care at his own hospital.

"In the traditional model of patient care, uncoordinated handoffs are made from one provider to the next and to the next and so on without any attention to the collective impact on the patient's experience," says the Marshall Steele website.

"The traditional approach to care is often one of individuality rather than that of a team. As a result, inefficiencies abound and opportunities are lost. Messages are inconsistent. Patient education and preparation are lacking. Cross-departmental communication is absent. Opportunities to exceed expectations are missed, and as a result, customer (patient and physician) loyalty is at risk," the website continues.

Fortunately, CRMC is no stranger to the Steele Destination Centers approach.

"They designed a lot of the Spine Academy after the Joint Academy, which has been quite successful," said neurosurgeon Douglas Hershkovitz, MD, of the physicians working with the hospital to help design the

program. "So they've had experience in doing this before. I'm excited to see how it works."

The Spine Academy will be a dedicated unit on CRMC's third floor south, with 17 beds and state-of-the-art equipment, Floyd said. As with the Joint Academy, a lot of the focus will be on rehabilitation.

As the unit progresses, surgical outcomes will be made available to both physicians and the public.

But the academy is not just for surgeries.

Going with the flow

"Places advertise that they're a spine center, but they're talking about a surgery center," Floyd said. "We're going to have the surgery part, but we'll also have these people on the front end who will be educating the patients and coordinating the appointments to the different physicians."

Perhaps the patient is a seasonal resident and just wants to find a spine physician in the area.

Or maybe the patient is experiencing back pain and doesn't know what to do. Or it could be a referral from a physician or emergency unit. Just a single call to the Spine Academy gets the ball rolling.

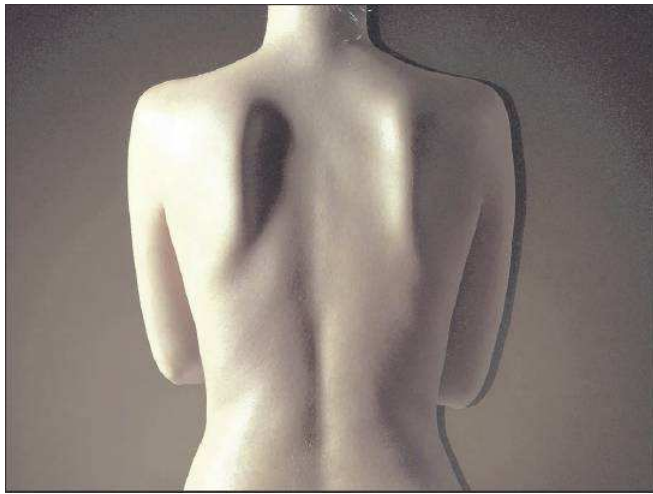
"When a referral to the Spine Academy, it comes directly to me," said Kim Stewart, the unit's nurse navigator. "My responsibility is to get in touch with the patient and obtain a history as well as any films the patient might have had, and send that information on to the spine specialist that will be reviewing that patient's medical information. It's kind of a presurgical intervention."

An assessment is made to determine the next step in the patient's care. Do they need a surgeon consult? Or do they need more noninvasive care such as a nerve block? One benefit of the Spine Academy is speed.

"Rather than having to wait for an appointment for a physician's office, it's our responsibility to have a physician review the patient's medical history within approximately three days," Stewart said.

Then the physician alerts the patient as to the next step in the process — whether that's additional testing, physical therapy or an office appointment. And it's all coordinated through the Spine Academy.

There is another benefit as well, inherent in the name of the unit itself.



FILE PHOTO

All spine, all the time

While the Spine Academy won't change his approach, Hershkovitz said, it will change the elements that are out of his control.

"What's available now is more of an ad hoc menu — you get a little bit here, a little bit there," Hershkovitz said. "The nurses there are more like jacks of all trades — they're not spine-trained nurses. Physical therapists are not spine-trained physical therapists."

The intention of the academy is to staff the unit with nurses and therapists that specialize in spine care. They will be familiar with different spine conditions and what each condition requires in terms of nursing or therapeutic care.

"I think it's going to make a huge difference — certainly in how patients experience their postoperative care," Hershkovitz said.

"They'll be more comfortable in the hospital, and program will probably

shorten their hospital stay quite a bit."

Patients in Charlotte County won't have to wait long to benefit from the Spine Academy.

While the unit itself isn't slated to open until August, the outpatient referral and care coordination process should launch within the next couple of weeks, Stewart said. Spine surgery patients will recuperate in CRMC's current facilities until the academy beds are available.

Also, the same physicians that will be reviewing the patients' dispositions and treating them now are the same as when the Spine Academy opens.

"This is the wave of the future — for spine care to have specialized units," Hershkovitz said. "This is going to be something that is very advantageous for the average patient."

Charlotte Regional Medical Center is located at 809 E. Marion Ave., Punta Gorda. For more information, call 941-639-3131.