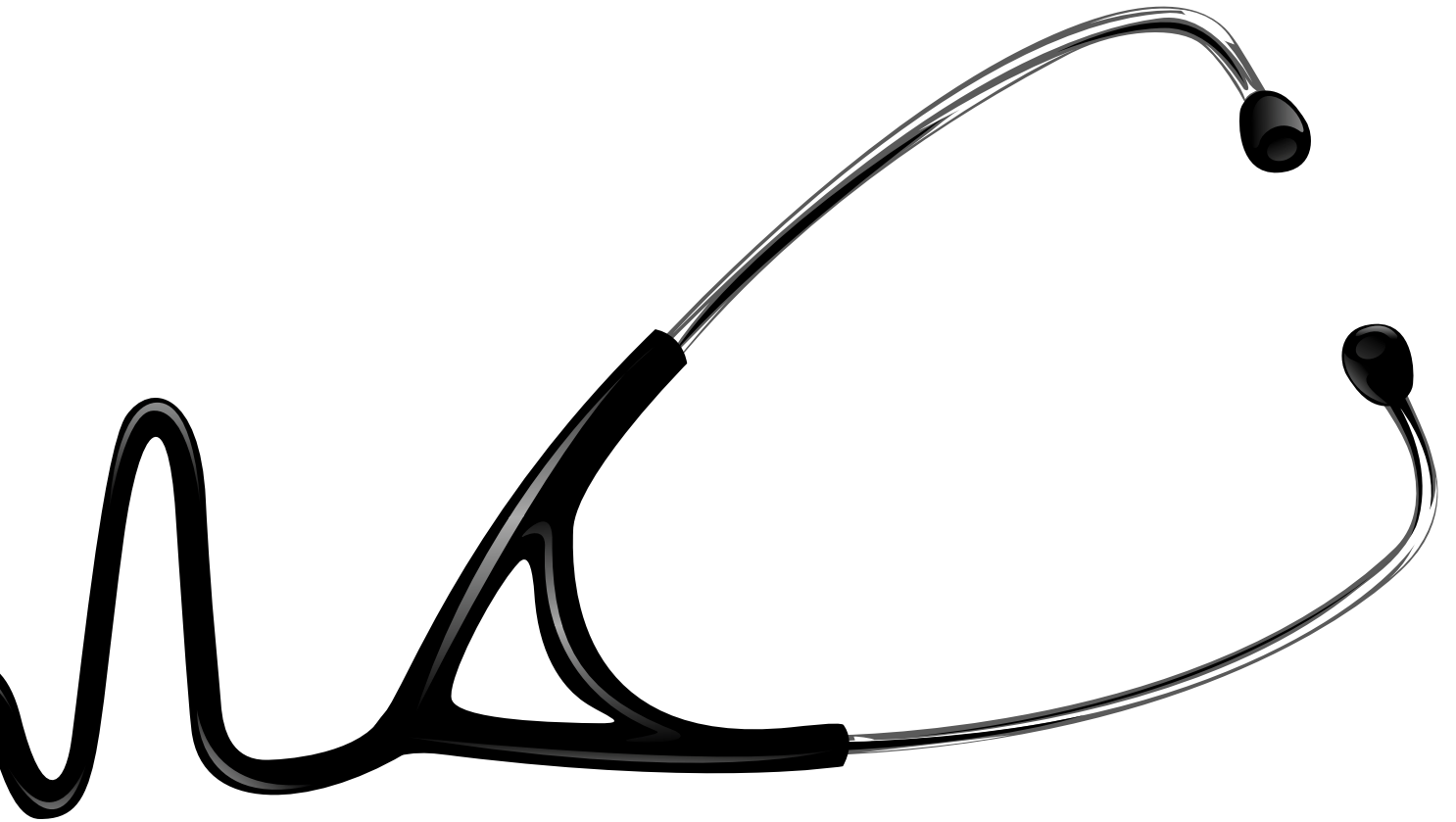


Serious medicine

BY MARSHA BROWN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVEN SCHILLIO

Expanding health-care options keep
Parker County patients closer to home



Not so long ago, most residents of Parker County commuted to Fort Worth, Dallas or much farther afield for treatment of anything more complicated than the flu. That's all changed now.

Linda Boyett has lived in Parker County for 45 years. She and her husband, Rick, sold the family's septic-system business in 2005 to to enjoy retirement.

Linda hadn't thought a lot about the quality of local health care. She and her family had always been healthy. But just two years into retirement, Linda was diagnosed with ovarian cancer.

Initially, she was treated in Fort Worth. "Then ... I told [my doctor] I

wanted to be treated in Weatherford. ... I'm so glad I did."

Boyett, who continues with chemotherapy every two weeks, often thinks of how much more difficult her life would be if she had travel routinely to Fort Worth or Dallas or cities more distant. She is a patient in Weatherford of Dr. Ray D. Page, at the Center for Cancer & Blood Disorders.

Rhonda Whitby was busy with family life when diagnosed with ovarian cancer six years ago after a trip to the emergency room at Campbell Memorial Hospital (now Weatherford Regional Medical Center).

The doctors at Campbell referred Whitby to Page. The first order of business involved chemotherapy.

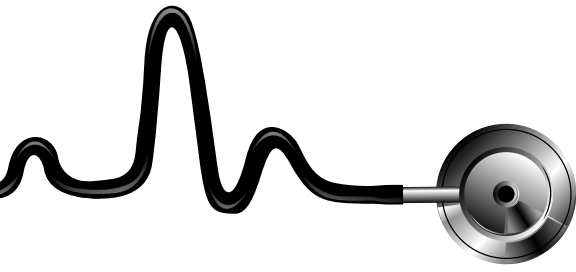
"They were always positive and caring at the center," says Whitby. "The outlook was just not that good."

Whitby wanted to take a more aggressive approach. Page helped her find one.

"There was a clinical trial they were conducting right here in Parker County," Whitby says. The term "clinical trial" might intimidate some patients, but not Whitby.

"Being involved in a clinical trial was actually very empowering," she says. "Rather than just sitting there and waiting for the disease to take over, ... I felt that I was taking steps to beat it."

With the facility near her home, Whitby was able to spend time with



In remission, Rhonda Whitby returns to the center every six months for a follow-up with Dr. Ray D. Page.

“It was so nice that they offered the program here in Parker County. At first the only other option was for me to go to Houston.”

— Rhonda Whitby, whose cancer is in remission

her husband and teenage daughters that she otherwise would have spent commuting.

Like Boyett, if Whitby had been diagnosed with cancer just a few years earlier, participating in a clinical trial in Weatherford would not have been possible.

“It was so nice that they offered the program here in Parker County,” Whitby says. “At first the only other option was for me to go to [M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in] Houston.”

Boyett’s and Whitby’s experiences demonstrate rapid changes in the local health-care industry — dramatic changes in the lives of Parker County families.

THE BEGINNING

The trend of bringing specialized medical care to Parker County became noticeable in the mid-1990s with the opening of the first office of the Center for Cancer & Blood Disorders.

What started as a satellite office in Weatherford grew to include a research program headed by Page.

“I’ve built a research program with the latest and greatest drugs,” Page says. “People don’t have to travel ... to get access to these clinical trials. ... We provide full services for chemotherapy, cancer research and clinical trials.”

One force driving the growth of the Parker County medical community is the same business savvy that brings other services, such as commercial

development and housing growth, to predominantly rural areas. But another factor contributes.

“For me, personally,” says Page, “I grew up in Grand Prairie. ... I would go out west, and I loved Parker County. I had a dream of living and working in the area.”

Despite what Page describes as “a superb offer from M.D. Anderson,” he chose to follow his original dream. “I bought a home in Aledo,” he says.

Meanwhile, the center continued to grow.

“We just made a \$6.5 million investment in Parker County,” Page says, pointing to a new facility and new equipment unveiled in 2007. “We made it [the Weatherford center] a one-stop-shopping cancer center. We’re now in the process of living that dream. As more people move into Parker County, the center will continue to grow. We’ll bring in more subspecialists, but we take it one step at a time.”

GROWTH CONTINUES

While the cancer center continues to grow, Weatherford Regional Medical Center (WRMC) is expanding by leaps and bounds.

The \$27 million investment that WRMC is infusing into Parker County includes a new emergency room, completed last September; a recently completed intensive care unit; and a radiology department due to open this spring.

The first phase of redevelopment will expand the hospital to about 230,000 square feet, a 23 percent increase.

The new ER features more than twice the beds (23), triple the space (4,500 square feet) and separate walk-in and ambulance entrances. The ICU capacity increases by 50

percent (12 beds); size triples to 2,400 square feet.

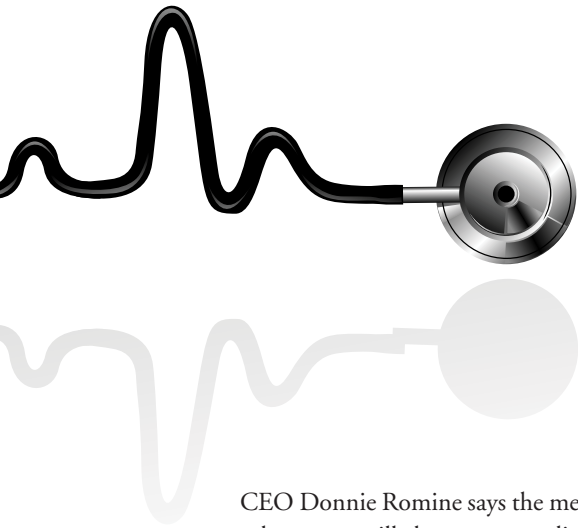
The radiology department will more than double its current space (to 3,200 square feet) and consolidate operations. A new location next to the emergency department makes for more efficient patient service.

COUNTY CLINICS

Because Weatherford is not convenient to every corner of Parker County's more than 910 square miles, WRMC is opening clinics across the county. The national trend toward rural clinics emerged more than a decade ago in an effort to relieve traffic at main-hospital hospital emergency rooms, where care is most costly. The objective was to provide outlying areas with smaller clinics with a less urgent and more informal atmosphere. WRMC's Parker County clinics align with the idea.



Donnie Romine, Weatherford Regional Medical Center CEO, oversees the expansion of the intensive care unit and other hospital departments.



CEO Donnie Romine says the medical center will have seven clinics by the end of 2010, one of them in Brock. Population growth in the Brock area shows no sign of slowing.

“People in Brock look at Aledo and the football program, especially winning the [2009] state championship, and they see Brock as the next Aledo,” says Romine.

Dale Goltart, formerly with Cardiovascular Provider Resources in Dallas, has joined WRMC as director of practice management. Even he can't say how many clinics he expects to manage over the long term.

“Who knows?” Goltart says. “Eight or nine probably. I have six now.”

Romine names them: “On the horizon, we have Lone Star [Medical Plaza, serving Willow Park and Aledo], Weatherford Primary Care, Weatherford Specialty Care, Weatherford Children's Clinic, Santo, Brock, and we have a wound-care center. So by September when Lone Star opens, [Goltart will] be responsible for seven clinics.”

Lone Star Medical Plaza is due to open in the fall of 2010 along the south access road off Interstate 20. The developer is Dallas-based Med Development.

HOSPITAL'S EVOLUTION

In 2005, the board of trustees of the Parker County Hospital District determined it needed a capital partner.

“I don't know who sought out whom,” Romine says. “Probably the hospital district [approached] different organizations, since we already had the hospital in Granbury and we were actively acquiring hospitals.

Brentwood, Tenn.-based Community Health Systems announced the acquisition in November 2006 of what was then called Campbell Memorial Hospital, a 99-bed acute-care general hospital, in Weatherford. The hospital, immediately renamed Weatherford Regional Medical

Center, was acquired in a 30-year prepaid lease transaction from the Parker County Hospital District.

“We saw a very good, growing market,” says Romine, who was CEO of Community Health Systems' Lake Granbury Medical Center at the time of the Weatherford acquisition. “This hospital fit the model of hospitals that our company owns. We prefer not to be in large metropolitan areas, but on the periphery and in areas that historically have been underserved. The periphery areas are the ones that are growing the fastest, and the health-care facilities haven't kept up with the growth because it's so expensive to keep up with.”

Romine came to Weatherford in 2006 as CEO of WRMC. He has faced a number of challenges.

“The biggest challenge is the same as any other big hospital,” he says. “There are so many things that need to be done. Our company sets a very high standard, so there's not just one thing to do to bring things up to the expected level. There's list after list after list of things to do. In light of that, deciding what to do first is probably the biggest challenge.

“We developed a four-pronged strategy,” he recalls. “And top of the list is what we title ‘Develop Internal

WRMC's Lone Star Medical Plaza, which will serve Willow Park and Aledo, will open in the fall.



Excellence.’ That’s a focus on quality, a focus on customer service, and a focus on communication.”

Romine and his team also noticed that many areas of the community were either underserved or entirely unserved, he says.

“So we filled in the gaps by recruiting the appropriate qualified physicians,” he explains. They expanded some services and discontinued others. “For instance, Solis

Healthcare is better at mammography,” Romine says. “So we quit doing mammography ourselves, still knowing the services were provided on the campus...”

What’s still lacking? “Spine surgery, ENT [ear, nose and throat], neurology, a wound-care center, cardiac services are among the services in the works of being added at Weatherford Regional,” Romine says.

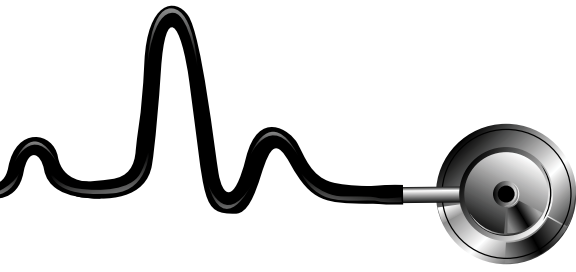
Community Health Systems, the

“People tell us they are glad they don’t have to go to Fort Worth anymore to have surgery.”

— developer Mike Kwedar.



Dale Golgart manages WRMC clinics.



Lindsay M. McBride, D.O., came to WRMC last summer.

parent company of Weatherford Regional, is a publicly traded, for-profit company.

“Whatever money we’ve made at this hospital, we put it right back into this hospital,” Romine says. “We just put \$27 million into our first-phase expansion and are in the process of building a \$3.5 million radiology department. We have also recruited 20 new physicians at a pretty substantial capital investment. So we do expect a return on these investments, like any other business.”

When Romine began to assess needs for improvement, one priority was the recruitment of a female OB/GYN. As a result, Lindsay M. McBride, D.O., an obstetrics and gynecol-

ogy physician, joined Weatherford Regional Medical Center last summer. McBride also is a longtime associate of Dr. Ray D. Page.

Last fall, WRMC received a Texas Health Care Quality Improvement Achievement Award from TMF Health Quality Institute, the Medicare Quality Improvement Organization for Texas.

Dennis Clayton, of the Weatherford Economic Development Authority, welcomes all this growth. “Community Health Systems, the parent company of WRMC, has proactively recruited all these physicians that our community really needs,” he says. “As the community’s economic development director, I’m thrilled because that brings more jobs, educated jobs, that pay higher wages. That increases property values in the city. Each doctor who comes in normally will build an office, hire a staff and buy equipment. It’s great.”

MEDICAL PARK EMERGES

While the redevelopment of Weatherford Regional began to take shape, a nearby 14-acre plot of raw land was being prepared for the establishment of Park City Medical Complex.

The idea for the development came from a group of doctors, led by orthopedic surgeon Thomas Binzer, D.O. They were looking at buying a building together and showed the deal to their wealth-management counselor, Mike Kwedar.

Kwedar suggested that the doctors could better use their money to develop a medical office park of their own to make money rather than simply spend money.

The doctors liked Kwedar’s suggestions so much that they told him to implement it, to become their developer and CEO.

The first building of the medical park, the Surgery Center at Park City Medical Complex, opened in June 2006. The 10,000-square-foot center is available to doctors, for a fee, to perform outpatient surgical procedures. The number of active physicians varies (18, as of January), as does the frequency of their scheduled surgeries.

“We’re committed to providing credible alternatives in medical care ...,” Kwedar says. “People tell us they are glad they don’t have to go to Fort Worth anymore to have surgery.”

The next addition to the development, the 8,000-square-foot Lone Star Pain Medicine, opened in 2007, followed by Parker County Physical Therapy, Physicare Inc., also in 2007, covering about 9,000 square feet. Ground has been broken for a 7,500-square-foot radiology center, and construction is set to begin on a minor-emergency center.

CHOICES, CHOICES

Such increases in service represent greater choices for Parker County residents. More choices, closer to home, can equal less down time, in an age when no one has down time to spare.

Linda Boyett, meanwhile, continues to battle cancer. “They’re so upbeat, so positive at the [cancer] center,” she says. “They’re always so happy to see me. That makes it easier to deal with.”

The outlook for Boyett’s type of cancer is not terribly sunny, but neither was the outlook for Rhonda Whitby’s case. She is now in remission. Whitby characterizes the turn in her case as a miracle and visits the center every six months.

Boyett says, “I’m praying for a miracle, too.” Every moment she saves with local therapy is a moment she can spend with her family. 🍎