

Growing Healthy?

Growth tests East Valley health systems

by Cynthia Scanlon
photography by Loren Anderson

You have probably read about the burgeoning growth the East Valley is experiencing. Seemingly every month, a new list of the fastest growing areas makes its way into the media. Usually one of Arizona's East Valley cities is at, or near, the top. With some of those cities growing exponentially, all industries are being affected, including transportation, construction and housing. But few industries are having to grapple with the challenges created by swelling populations more than health care.

When a community begins to grow rapidly, the population's need for quality medical treatment often meets or exceeds the pace. And leaders in the East Valley know this all too well. "Health care is part of the infrastructure of a community. When the community is growing, the health care piece grows right along with it to meet its needs," says Kaylor E. Shemberger, president and CEO of East Valley Regional Health System. "This is one of the fastest growing communities in the nation today. We are having to cope with unprecedented growth, and it is a very significant challenge to us."

Shemberger isn't the only health care professional feeling the squeeze, says Bill Byron, spokesman for Desert Samaritan Hospital. "There's not an area where we don't see an impact in terms of the growth of the East Valley. This year, our emergency center will see between 61,000 and 62,000 people. That will be the largest number of ER patients served in the state," he says.



Kaylor E. Shemberger,
president and CEO of East
Valley Regional Health System

Desert Sam is also on track to deliver between 6,300 and 6,500 babies this year. "That's the second largest number of births in the state at any single institution," says Byron. "The number of new births has consistently been over 6,000 for the past four years."

Additionally, Desert Sam is the third busiest open heart center in the state, according to Byron. He says last year, there were 646 cases and so far into 1998 that number is running ahead by about 4 percent. Even pediatrics is seeing a large jump at Desert Sam. "We opened our pediatric intensive care unit last September, and we're seeing a 30 percent increase in pediatric services," says Byron.

He sees pediatrics at the hospital continuing to expand. "We opened an eight-bed unit, but it is designed to expand to 14 once the need gets there."

Byron anticipates that need may arrive as soon as the spring of 1999. Of particular concern to Byron is the East Valley's lack of a Level I Trauma Center. While Phoenix currently has five of these centers, which provide care for the most seriously ill emergency patients, none of them are located in the East Valley. The nearest center is Scottsdale Healthcare's Osborn facility.

"In the East Valley, there is no Level I trauma center, and yet nearly 1 million people live here," says Byron. "We're working very closely with our staff to determine how we can provide Level I trauma care."

That has yet to be decided. So far, Tempe St. Luke's Hospital has been able to manage the growth Tempe is experiencing, according to Mary Jo Gregory, CEO for Tempe St. Luke's. The one challenge the hospital is facing is recruiting and keeping an expanding medical staff. "We continue to feel somewhat of a nursing shortage in certain specialty areas," says Gregory. "But even there, we've been fortunate because we have a lot of long-term employees who enjoy this location."

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She adds, "We're not inner city, so we don't have the kinds of negative things that go with an urban hospital."

Since the growth in the East Valley shows no sign of slowing, health care facilities are having to expand, consolidate, affiliate and just plain work more efficiently. Many are taking stock of what they have to offer and seeing if they can either streamline their services or expand them in such a way as to meet the need without sacrificing quality. "In many areas, we are at capacity," adds Byron, "and that's not going to change."

The challenge, he says, is how to accommodate all the need. "What do we need to do in the way of expansion to accommodate this service?" he asks.

It is a question many in the health care field are asking themselves on a continual basis. For many, like Chandler Regional Hospital, the answer seems to lie in expanding services and facilities. Chandler Regional Hospital, which is the hospital within the East Valley Regional Health System, was started back in 1961 when the city's population was a few thousand. Today, the area serves more than 1 million people. "We built a new hospital in 1984, expanded it, and we are now expanding it again," says Shemberger. "In 1985, the hospital performed 40 births a month, now we're doing 300 births a month."

Chandler's OB department is the fifth busiest OB department in Arizona, according to Shemberger. So the hospital is adding additional capacity to the OB department, which will be the second expansion since the hospital opened in 1984. Chandler Regional is also building

another floor on their main hospital and adding special monitoring beds. They have opened a new cancer treatment center as well. "We've had to move off campus and out into the community with ambulatory health centers to meet the growing need," says Shemberger.

Currently, the East Valley Regional Health System has facilities in the Foothills, one in Sun Lakes and one in Gilbert. Shemberger says the hospital is also in the process of designing a new ambulatory surgery and imaging center on campus. "We hope to break ground in the fall," he says.

While health care facilities themselves may be expanding, Byron sees the health care industry here eventually consolidating to just a few key players. "In the Phoenix market, we are going through the consolidation steps that have taken place in other communities going through a lot of growth," he says, citing San Diego as an example. "At one time they had 25 different health care systems. Today there are four."

Byron adds, "Within the Phoenix market, we will ultimately evolve into probably no more than four major health care systems."

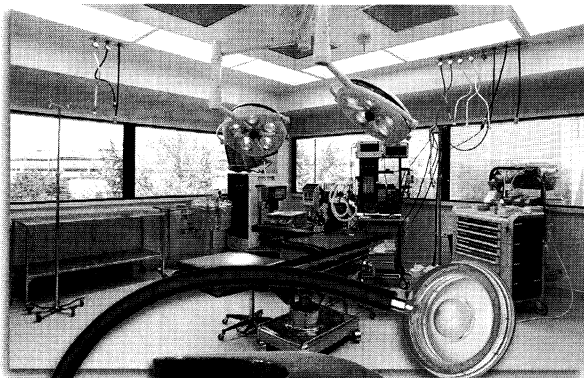
According to Shemberger, this consolidation won't come without some upheaval. "Every major

health care organization feels they need to have a presence in the East Valley," he says. "There is going to be a battle for market share."

Tempe St. Luke's Gregory is aware of the need to capture market share by attracting the attention of the public it serves. Gregory admits Tempe St. Luke's is widely known because of the exposure they receive from the media. "We have a presence in the market by having

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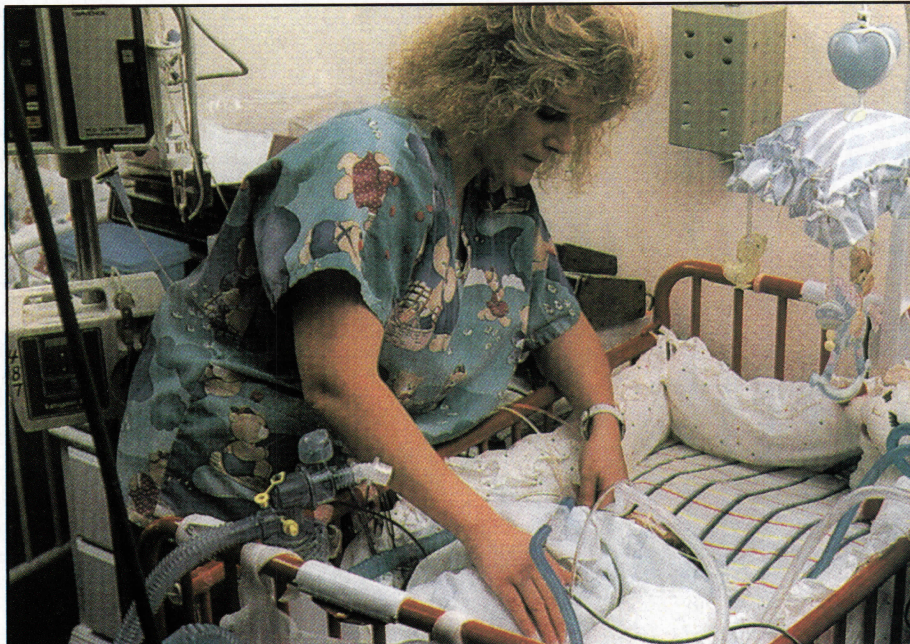
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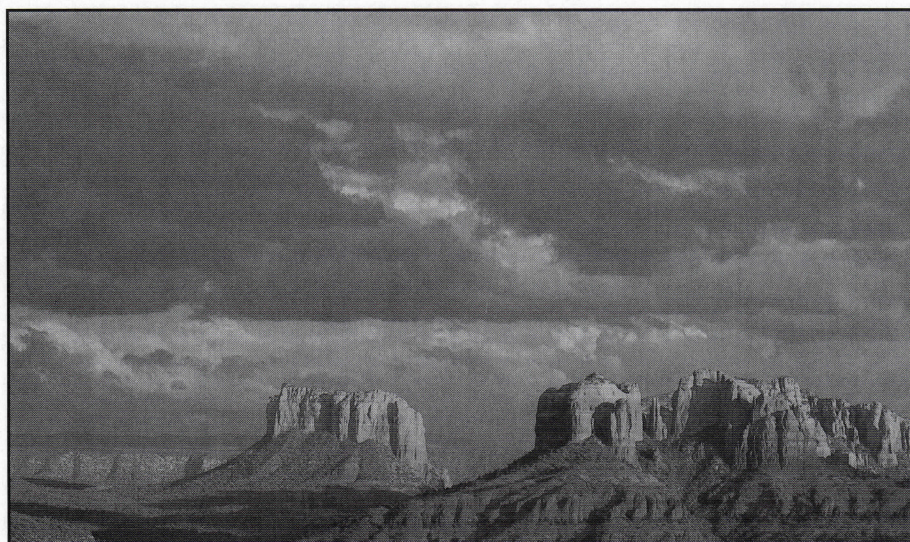
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five hospitals here and doing aggressive advertising," she says.

That philosophy seems to be working for Tempe St. Luke's. But Shemberger feels differently. Rather than battling in a health care free-for-all, Shemberger prefers a subtler approach. "We affiliate with other larger organizations to bring the necessary capital to the table to assist us in meeting our growth needs," he says.

By affiliating and consolidating players, Shemberger believes the health care industry in the Valley can increase the efficiency in the delivery system, eliminate the redundancies and improve the rationalization of resources for the community. A community that just keeps growing.

Surprisingly, Shemberger doesn't attribute an aging population to the explosive growth in health care. "It's

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strictly a response to the growing population here," he says.

Byron agrees. "The Valley is a very desirable place to live," he says. "We do not anticipate there will be a slowdown in population growth, which means there will be an increase in the need for health services."

In the long run, Shemberger believes the market will ultimately control the manner in which health care is delivered and received. Just how that will all shake out still remains to be seen. "My hope and trust is that consumers will benefit," Shemberger says.

AB

Cynthia Scanlon is a Tempe free-lance writer.