

is sick enough to be admitted, or has a scheduled or emergency surgery," Mr. Lockett explains. "There is no more wait-and-see. We can't take people who don't have good stringent needs. We have to make sure their conditions merit our care. So this will be a great surgical hospital."

Other patients with different or less-demanding needs will continue to find service in the LMHS's other hospitals or care centers, he says.

Some critics see that as the same-old same-old.

"There is no doubt this is a step up," says Dr. Bob Schwartz, director of the Robert Rauschenberg Center for Living in Fort Myers, which treats HIV and AIDS patients, many of them poor.

"But if anyone says they will get more medicine for less money, I say, do they work for Bernie Madoff? Hospitals, in their ever-loving desire to escape the poor — the people who desperately need care — have found better ways to serve the wealthy. Is this just an evasion of responsibility to poor people?"

In each of the 233 private rooms, it's unquestionably an evasion of the sometimes infamous reliance on paper records, as well as an elimination of standard old-model discomforts like high beds that are hard for sick people to get into or out of.

Here, each new private bed can be lowered to about knee-high, if necessary. More importantly, a bedside computer will give doctors and nurses up-to-the-minute access to records of every single procedure, test, observation or opinion about a patient made within the hospital's walls.

### Profit and loss

All of that is massively expensive, of course, which is why — coupled with recession — hospital officials say the system is financially troubled.

The LMHS budget for 2009 will run roughly \$1 billion, the same as in 2008. About half of the system's income arrives from Medicare patients, whose insurance only covers about 82 cents on a dollar of care, leaving LMHS to pay down the other 18 cents. And the system loses \$11 million alone each year just maintaining the trauma unit, says Mr. Akin.

He estimates that LMHS has to cover the unpaid costs of about \$200 million worth of care in a year, for "charity and Medicare."

Meanwhile, officials had to borrow \$285 million to build the new hospital.

Still, they managed to eke out \$3 million in net revenue for the 2008 fiscal year.

"That's a miniscule revenue when you're looking at a billion in net operating revenue," says John Wiest, chief financial and institutional services officer for LMHS.

And it won't go a long way toward paying down the LMHS debt.

"We have \$417 million in cash and investments, but our total debt is \$651 million," he explains. "I think a healthy ratio there is one-to-one. Meaning, our cash and investments would be at \$651 million, too. We expected this (drop) from the acquisition of the new hospital, and we're trying to rebuild it, but we're in a very difficult environment. We're dealing with completely unprecedented economic times."

But the new Gulf Coast Medical Center won't burden the Lee Memorial system.

Unlike many other hospitals, officials expect the new one to cover its own costs and maybe even serve as a cash cow, helping defray the debt incurred by treating uninsured or underinsured patients who inadvertently put a massive financial strain on the rest of the system.

"This hospital will pay for itself," insists Mr. Akins. "Lee Memorial acquired it in the beginning (in 2006) partly as a defensive move. The previous owners, HCA, were designing a hospital that would take the high-end stuff out of the community.



JIM MCLAUGHLIN /FLORIDA WEEKLY

The new Cysto room set up for urology imaging. The new Gulf Coast Medical Center is more than 10 acres under roof.



JIM MCLAUGHLIN /FLORIDA WEEKLY

The new atrium is almost ready to open to the public. The new hospital costs more than \$285 million and includes 22 operating rooms and 349 patient rooms.

More and more, Lee Memorial was getting hung with all of the no-pays and the uninsured. It was going to put Lee in a situation where they'd have to build more beds to take care of the uninsured, and at the same time not get as much of the paying business to offset big losses."

### When the doors open

But officials turned a defensive move into a step forward, one being celebrated far and wide beginning this week on Valentine's Day, Saturday, Feb. 14.

On that special day of the metaphorical heart, which can sometimes be broken, people will tour the new hospital to celebrate the muscular heart, which can often be fixed or replaced, especially at the Gulf Coast Medical Center.

Among many other features, the new hospital has a "full-service cardiac and vascular program featuring the Allura Xper FD20, a sophisticated x-ray system that provides crisp, detailed images during minimally invasive endovascular

surgery. There will also be a new cardiac catheterization lab and an open-heart surgical suite," according to a press release.

There's more, of course. The transplant center has the shortest wait-list for kidneys in the nation. The hospital includes a childbirth suite, a latest-greatest neurosurgery department, 43 beds in the emergency room along with "a 40-slice CT scanner which provides three-dimensional images," and 233 private bedrooms where no patients ever have to share space with other patients, officials say.

Along the medical parade-route on March 8, therefore, there will be no need for ticket tape. The blizzard of public relations applause surrounding the opening of the new, high-tech public hospital is enough.

When they finally turn the key, medical personnel will be cranking up a lean mean efficiency machine, officials say.

The hospital will offer doctors, nurses

and patients the most advanced medical equipment and care settings, including information technology that aims to curtail redundancy — unnecessary tests or prescriptions made by doctors who aren't communicating efficiently with each other, for example.

That might ultimately save money for consumers, not to mention improving their chances for robust health.

FGCU Professor Rubens proposes a wait-and-see approach to the benefits of the new Gulf Coast Medical Center and the entire Lee Memorial system.

"Now in Lee County, we see one dominant system," he explains. "It's an opportunity to look at how an integrative system can work: the cost savings and benefits, from the delivery perspective, and also the efficiency — we can see how that will work in the future.

"These next 10 years will be very important. They could set the stage for (LMHS) being one of the forerunners of health care reform." ■