

Riverside Medical Center

Corporate Spotlight

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The da Vinci residing within the halls of south-suburban Chicago's Riverside Medical Center is a work of art even Leonardo himself would admire. The computer-enhanced, robotic laparoscopic surgical system allows doctors to perform major medical procedures through tiny surgical openings.

"At Riverside, we are committed to new ideas and innovation," president and CEO Dennis Millirons said, describing the role technologies like the da Vinci Surgical System have played in his organization's success. "If you look at healthcare across the US, hospitals are always looking for something new, something different. We've pushed that. But what's important is that we continue to use that to the benefit of the patient and the practitioner."

Riverside is among the first hospitals in the world to use robotics in surgery; only 250 such systems are in place across the globe. The da Vinci, affectionately known as Bernie after Christiaan Barnard, the first surgeon to perform a heart transplant in a human, allows surgeons to perform complex operations with the least possible invasion and trauma to the body. Patients experience less blood loss, fewer complications, faster recoveries, and shorter hospital stays.

The best example of the system's benefits is in open-heart surgery. Without the da Vinci, open-heart procedures typically require the breaking of the patient's breastbone to access the heart. This approach results in more pain and weeks of recovery time. Using the robotic system, mechanical arms with instruments smaller than a dime are inserted through small incisions in the ribcage.

"We did one of the early procedures in coronary artery bypass after the FDA approved the robotic approach," Millirons said. "We've had a great deal of successful experience with prostate surgery using the robot, and colon and esophageal surgeries. Right now, we're preparing to do our first heart valve replacement. Robotics is a great example of the innovative technology being embraced at Riverside."

Building it up

Ten years ago, Riverside was a small, community hospital. Today, the system is celebrating the opening of its new 45,000 square-foot ambulatory care medical plaza that will serve the entire region. Millirons said the growth was spurred by a sound strategy based on becoming a regional provider and developing the clinical services side of the operation.

"We were able to commandeer a regional strategy by building new facilities that contain advanced technology in the market area we serve to the north, which is a very high growth market driven by greater Chicago's sprawl into the suburbs," Millirons said. "We've been able to put facilities in strategic locations and fuel our growth by doing that over a period of time. If you look over the past 10 years, we've tripled our assets, increased our cash position, and at the same time, invested a substantial amount of capital for the future."

Riverside's substantial growth is highlighted by the time frame in which it took place—the Medicare and malpractice suits era. While other hospitals were closing their doors, Riverside was building new facilities. "We've dealt with these challenges straight on," Millirons said. "When we were faced with the Balanced Budget Act of 1997, which was a very difficult period for us, we cut back on cost and decreased our cost per unit of service while we were growing. We were able to do that and survive the Balanced Budget Act effectively. Today, we continue to use that philosophy of reasonably managing cost while growing at the same time."

Panning for and polishing new employees has proved to be a difficult task in today's dry riverbed of a market—a process Millirons and his management team have addressed by moving further upstream. The hospital system has developed strong relationships with nursing schools in and around the greater Chicago area, and those ties are beginning to produce results. This year, Riverside hired a group of new graduates twice the size of any group it had ever hired.

And Millirons believes they'll have those new nurses for a long time. Statistics show Riverside enjoys a turnover rate half the national average. "We've been able to accomplish that by studying and asking people why they're here, what they want. We're in the process of doing an online employee survey right now. We'll get 85% of our people to participate in it, find out what they want, and try to deliver that."

Riverside's strategy of growth has also aided in employee retention. New facilities provide new opportunities and challenges for employees to grow, Millirons said. By promoting a culture of entrepreneurialism, where new and innovative ideas are encouraged, employees feel like a part of something bigger. "We continue to see opportunities for growth and opportunities for our people to achieve what they want with their careers. Our employees buy into that and believe this is a fabulous place to work."

Back to the future

The torch lighting the path to Riverside's success continues to be innovation through technology. Along with the da Vinci robot, the hospital system features a new 18 meV linear accelerator delivering intensity modulated radiation therapy; a 1.5 Tesla, open, short bore MRI; a 64-slice CT scanner; and a new generation of 4-D ultrasounds. Riverside is also working to create a paperless hospital, moving all of its medical records to an electronic system.

"We're digitizing the medical record as we speak," Millirons said. "That's the first step to getting rid of paper and going to computerized physician order entry. At the end of next year, we'll be very close to having a paperless hospital. We feel that's an important part of our strategy—to improve quality and efficiency by digitizing everything we can and having the ability to transmit images and information wherever it's needed. It's an incredibly important way to care for patients. That's a major part of our innovation."

"The really important issue here regarding Riverside, the differentiator, has been our ability to innovate and bring new technologies to the market. If we make Riverside a fantastic place for people to get their care, for physicians to practice, and for people to work as professionals, we'll be successful. We'll continue to concentrate on that strategy by using innovation to take us into the future."