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Pediatric services change in mid-county

BY SUSAN JENKS
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Pediatrics in Brevard, one of Brevard County's largest physician groups for children, no longer provides hospital care in the central part of the county.

As of early this month, doctors from the group stopped providing medical services to children at Wuesthoff Medical Center-Rockledge and at Cape Canaveral Hospital in Cocoa Beach.

Children younger than 13 requiring surgery or non-emergency care at Cape Canaveral Hospital now have to go to Holmes Regional Medical Center in Melbourne.

But Wuesthoff officials said that with eight pediatricians still on staff and two neonatologists serving the needs of newborns, they continue to offer full pediatric services at their flagship hospital, despite the loss of such a big group.

Dr. William Knappenberger, one of 11 pediatricians with Pediatrics in Brevard, cited several reasons for the group's decision, including a shrinking daily census at both hospitals of the youngest pediatric patients. Because of the low numbers, he said it was increasingly difficult to keep a good support team in place to provide the expertise needed for the children's care.

"Demographics are part of it," Knappenberger said, referring to the aging population, particularly in that part of the county.

"But in some ways we're also victims of our own success because of vaccine immunizations" against children's diseases that used to routinely requiring hospitalization.

Knappenberger conceded the group's decision means parents with young hospitalized children now face longer travel times and inconvenience to visit their children.

But, in general, pediatric units are not profitable for any hospital, he said, so maintaining a "good medical unit for everything today is no longer realistic."

Elliot Cohen, a spokesman for Cape Canaveral Hospital, said the hospital's pediatric unit had only two to three pediatric inpatient beds to begin with, reflecting the small demand in the area. Those beds now will serve children older than 13, who will still receive pediatric care elsewhere in the hospital.

"No one should hesitate to bring their child to Cape Canaveral Hospital if they're having an emergency," Cohen said in e-mail. "The same doctors and nurses in the emergency department will continue to care for patients regardless of their age."

Cape Canaveral Hospital is operated by Health First.

Still, Merritt Island resident Sharon Stringer, the mother of several small children — one of whom was born at Cape Canaveral Hospital — finds the pediatrician's action upsetting.

"It seems like this is a public service," she said. "There should be medical care available for these children that's not so far away." ■

Contact Jenks at 242-3657
or sjenks@floridatoday.com