

## It's a long ride to trauma center

by *Senta Scarborough* - Jun. 7, 2008 07:00 AM  
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If you have a life-threatening injury, you want to head for a Level 1 trauma center where surgeons and specialty staff are ready to help.

And you'd better hope you're in Phoenix.

Three of the Valley's Level 1 trauma centers are in central Phoenix, one is in north Phoenix and the other is in Scottsdale. There are none in the Southeast Valley.

"You can stand on St. Joe's roof and see the other (Phoenix) hospitals. Regionally, they are not distributed very well," Gilbert Fire Chief Collin Dewitt said. "It is a crisis in the East Valley to not have ready access to a Level 1 trauma center."

Mesa Fire Chief Harry Beck said the public risk is heightened as medical helicopters land on neighborhood streets and paramedics are unavailable for long stretches as they ride with ground ambulances to hospitals outside the Southeast Valley.

"It doesn't make sense to have a concentration of about a million people and have to drive across the river to get advanced life support," Beck said.

Most Southeast Valley victims of life-threatening shootings, stabbings or traffic accidents are flown or taken by ambulance to Maricopa Medical Center or Scottsdale Healthcare Osborn, the two closest Level 1 trauma centers.

Several reasons are tossed around for the Southeast Valley not having its own Level 1 center, including the inevitable financial losses that come with it.

The state's Level 1 trauma centers reported a large number of uninsured and undocumented patients and estimated the costs of uncompensated care at \$10 million to \$12 million at each facility, according to a report by the American College of Surgeons. Proposition 202, passed in 2002, ensured money from the Indian gaming industry would help offset the costs of trauma care but it hasn't been enough to handle the burden, the report showed.

The Level 1 trauma center at Banner Good Samaritan in central Phoenix cared for 2,730 patients last year at a loss of \$2.2 million.

"We know there is a need in the East Valley," said Dr. Forrest Holden, assistant chief medical officer for the non-profit Chandler Regional Hospital and Mercy Gilbert Medical Center. "The East Valley would definitely support a Level 1 trauma center."

Holden said a focus group is evaluating the

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hospitals with an eye toward new services that could include a Level 1 trauma center. The recommendations are expected this fall, but if a Level 1 center is approved it still could be at least two years away.

Neither Iasis, which operates Mountain Vista Medical Center in east Mesa, nor Banner Health, which operates several hospitals in the region, has plans for a Level 1 trauma center in the Southeast Valley.

"I believe that currently we have trauma system that serves this area well," said Bill Byron, Banner's senior director of public relations.

Getting proper help in the first 60 minutes - doctors call it the golden hour - is vital for Level 1 trauma patients with extensive head, chest or internal injuries.

"From the time of incident to the surgeon's table is so critical," said Bryan Jeffries, president of the United Mesa Firefighters Union, which represents firefighters in Mesa, Gilbert and Apache Junction. "Without having immediate access to a Level 1 trauma center, we are just having a poor effect on the possible outcomes. To our folks, it is very troubling."

Jeffries, who is a member of the community advisory board for Banner Desert Medical Center, says he has voiced his concerns to the hospital for years.

"There's been so much hearsay, it has gotten to, 'I'll believe it when I see it,' " Jeffries said. "We are building all these new hospitals and still nobody is talking about a trauma center, and it's a regional issue that we have got to come together on."

The American College of Surgeons

estimates that a Level 1 trauma center is needed for every million residents.

Will Humble, the assistant director of public health preparedness for the Arizona State Department of Health Services, said there are already enough Level 1 trauma centers, citing seven in a state with a population of 6 million.

On paper, the Valley's needs are met with five of the centers, but with well over a million residents in the Southeast Valley, and the potential for a million more in coming years in Pinal County, the locations don't work.

In the past six months, Scottsdale Healthcare Osborn treated 1,238 patients from the Southeast Valley.

"Communities that never were exposed to freeway driving are now commuting," Beck said. "It is a routine way of life and the higher the speed, the greater trauma there is if there is an accident."

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