

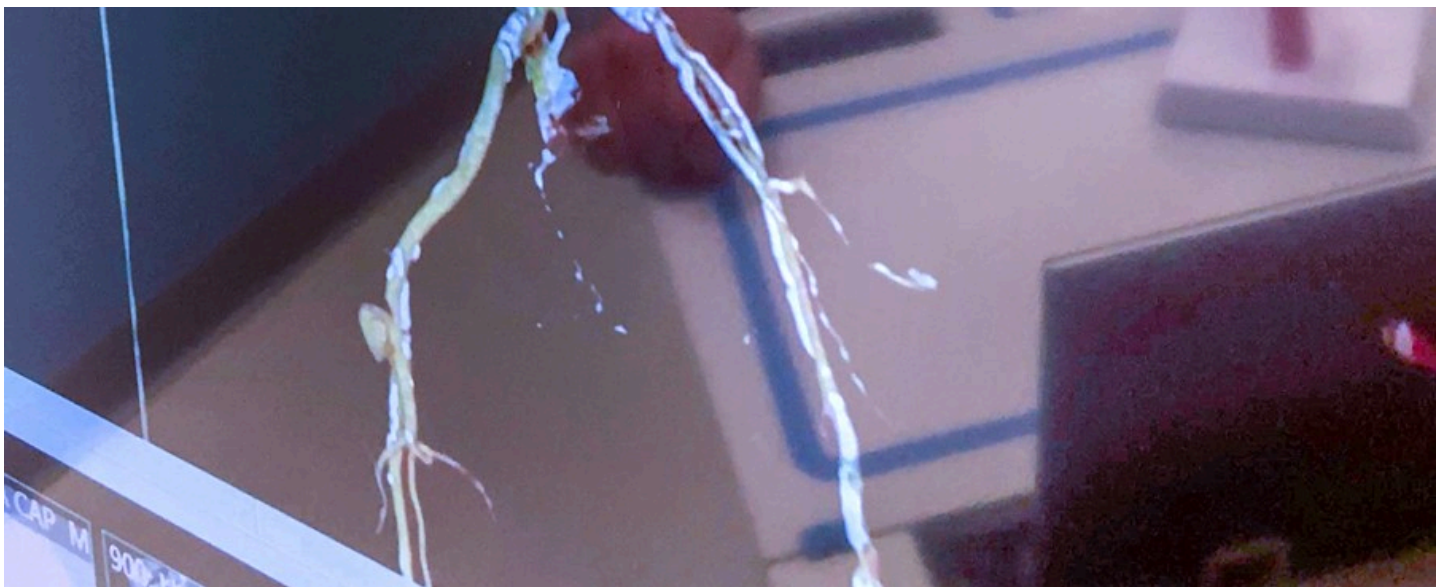
MedStar ready to open new \$6M cardiovascular center

Outpatient facility to ease treatment process for patients



Dr. Samer S. Najjar, regional chief of cardiology at MedStar Health, gestures with Dr. Raghuvver Vallabhaneni, MedStar's director of vascular surgery, and Cheryl Lunnan, MedStar's regional vice president of cardiovascular services, during a tour of the new MedStar Heart & Vascular Institute at Baltimore's MedStar Union Memorial Hospital. Karl Merton Ferron/Staff photos





Dr. Raghuveer Vallabhaneni, MedStar's director of vascular surgery, is reflected on the screen of an exam room monitor while demonstrating the ability for staff to display MRI or multidimensional imaging.

BY ANGELA ROBERTS

For patients with cardiovascular disease — who experience a range of problems affecting their heart and blood vessels — getting around is no easy feat. It can be challenging to trek across a hospital parking lot for a doctor's appointment, and then to venture to different floors to meet with specialists.

Starting Wednesday, cardiovascular patients at Baltimore's MedStar Union Memorial Hospital will be spared some exertion on the day of their tests, checkups and procedures with the opening of the hospital's integrated heart services center.

At the new outpatient center — located at 33rd and Calvert streets, where MedStar's counseling services used to be — specialists will come to the patients, instead of the other way around, said Dr. Samer Najjar, chief of cardiology for the health system's Baltimore region.

“Now, instead of having to worry about, ‘Gee, do I go to the third floor, fifth floor, or seventh floor?’ It's a one-stop shop,” Najjar said.

The \$6.3 million project involved gutting the 10,000-square-foot facility and building a behavioral health facility across the street, said Brian Cawley, senior vice president of operations at MedStar Good Samaritan and MedStar Union Memorial hospitals.

That facility, which houses the counseling and specialty services previously offered where the cardiovascular center is now, opened in late August, Cawley said. Planning for the project began about three years ago, and involved the

health center raising \$4.5 million in donations from patients, corporations, family foundations and the MedStar Union Memorial Auxiliary.

The new outpatient center features plenty of clinic rooms, where doctors will be able to meet with patients to discuss test results and answer their questions about future treatment. Doctors also will be able to conduct some tests and procedures at the center, including insertions of loop recorders — a device implanted underneath the chest skin that looks for concerning heart rhythms.

About 40 health care professionals — from specialists to patient care navigators — will work at the center every day once it opens to patients Wednesday, said Cheryl Lunnen, regional vice president of cardiovascular services at MedStar Health. The center's specialists will include physicians with expertise in heart failure, electrophysiology, cardiac catheterization and structural heart problems.

The center was designed with patients in mind, down to minute details, said Dr. Raghuveer Vallabhaneni, director of vascular services for MedStar's Baltimore region. Padded benches, for instance, break up long hallways on the second floor, in case patients need to stop and catch their breath.

Patient rooms are big enough for them to comfortably sit with family members who join them for appointments. And physicians have workstations on wheeling carts, allowing them to take notes and talk to their patients without turning their backs to them.

T.J. Senker, president of MedStar Good Samaritan and MedStar Union Memorial Hospitals, and senior vice president of MedStar Health, said the health system already has world-class cardiovascular physicians.

“Now,” he said, “we have the world-class space to really reflect the quality in the patient experience that our community deserves.”

With the growing number of cardiovascular patients across the country — heart disease is the leading cause of death in the U.S. — MedStar designed the new center at Union Memorial with expansion possibilities in mind. Renovation and construction projects are happening in other MedStar cardiovascular clinics and labs, including the one at Franklin Square Medical Center.

Vallabhaneni cited the aging population as one reason for rising cardiovascular disease rates. He also suspects that some patients delayed receiving care during the pandemic and are now experiencing more severe conditions and symptoms than they would have otherwise.

A more optimistic factor likely contributing to the growing patient population, Najjar said, is that improvements in technology have allowed doctors to conduct procedures they previously weren't able to complete. Now, physicians can use non-invasive procedures to accomplish goals that previously could be accomplished only in open-heart surgery.

Another welcome change in how doctors practice medicine is an increased focus on patient education, Vallabhaneni said. He and his colleagues don't want their patients leaving the center with their eyes glazed over after getting an information dump from their doctor about a potential test or treatment. It's important to them that patients thoroughly understand the condition affecting them — and the risks and benefits of certain procedures.

Vallabhaneni used to have to rely on his drawing skills and plastic models to educate patients about the vascular system. But at MedStar's new center, he'll have the help of advanced imaging technology and large monitors.

“All of us are very interested in patient autonomy,” said Vallabhaneni, adding: “This isn't the '60s, where we just pat the patients on the back and say, ‘Don't worry, sweetheart, we'll take care of you.’ ”