

MEMORIAL'S HEALTH

Savannahians look to Memorial University Medical Center to keep them healthy and safe, but where can Memorial turn when its fiscal temperature is on the rise? Memorial CEO Bob Colvin and state politicians are undertaking a risky game of "Operation" to keep the hospital's pulse from slowing any further.



WRITTEN BY MELINDA COPP

PHOTOGRAPH BY TERRY DUTHU

Life support: The staff of Memorial University Medical Center—like Medical Student Thomas Riddell (above)—are feeling the strain of insufficient state funding.

On February 7, around 7 p.m., a nightmare transpired at the Imperial Sugar Refinery in Port Wentworth. Within the mammoth factory, something sparked and caused the highly combustible sugar dust within one of the three 100-foot tall silos to ignite and explode. Witnesses in the community reported hearing a deep boom and seeing flames shoot several stories out of the plant, while inside a fire burning at upwards of 4,000 degrees ravaged the building and the 100 employees who were working that night.

Shortly after the blast, Karen Watts, the chief nursing officer of Memorial University Medical Center, received a phone call from the Medstar One Ambulance Service, alerting her to turn on her radio because there might be a mass casualty.

"A few minutes later, the police chief called and said 'this is not a drill...I'm on the site, and this is what I see,'" Watts recalls.

As the news broke on television, many people on MUMC's level-one Trauma Center staff started making their way to the hospital, and the

the trauma center. At the time of the blast, Colvin was driving back from Atlanta, getting updates over the phone. In recent months, the four-hour drive from Savannah to the state capital has become quite familiar to Colvin, because Memorial's financial stability has become part of a larger statewide healthcare issue.

Memorial's level-one Trauma Center is one of four in Georgia, and it serves approximately 35 counties in the southeastern part of the state, including portions of South Carolina. Because of the trauma center's level-one status, it treats everyone—unlike other facilities that can refuse treatment for uninsured patients. About 1.7 million people statewide don't have health insurance, with around 25% of Savannah

"The growth of totally uninsured patients [together with] the payments for the state low-income patients not going up at all, at the same time we're giving nursing raises and overall salary increases for the staff—it's that combination of things that have caused most of our problems," Colvin laments.

rooms could be seen in those clinics, if they were expanded and adequately funded."

Memorial helped establish two of those clinics, and they're currently working to find funding and open another one on Frederick Street between Memorial and St. Joseph's/Candler, which will, one hopes, alleviate some of the primary-care burden facing the emergency room.

"Growth of the tourism industry in Savannah was one piece of this; there were people coming into town and taking those jobs, but not having benefits," says Colvin, who explains that the only hospital in the state that treats more uninsured patients than Memorial is Grady Hospital in Atlanta. "At the same time, we thought the state would continue to help us with the Medicaid funding for those people who are low-income and on state plans, and they froze their reimbursement rates for six years."

The state currently pays hospitals and healthcare providers roughly 80% of the total cost of care, and their reimbursements for indigent care have slowed and dwindled as well.

"So...the growth of totally uninsured patients [together with], the payments for the state low-income patients not going up at all, at the same time we're giving nursing raises and overall salary increases for the staff—things you have to do—it's that combination of things that have caused most of our problems," Colvin laments.

Memorial had been financially healthy for about 10 years. Then, starting in 2004, its financial health began to falter. The hospital still had a positive bottom line in 2005, but between 2005 and 2006, it fell into the red, and 2007 was even worse. The hospital cut 24 management positions in May of 2007 and questions of

MEMORIAL MEDICAL SCHOOL EXPANDS

In fall of 2008, a new medical school will open its doors to the medical practitioners of the future. Mercer University, in conjunction with Memorial Health University Medical Center, will expand its two-year clinical program to become the full, four-year Mercer University School of Medicine. There will be 30 students in the first class, but the program will expand to a total of 240 students within the next few years. The completed expansion will double the total number of doctors graduating from Mercer every year. Soon, no one will need to ask, "Is there a doctor in the house?" For more information, visit www.memorialhealth.com or www.mercer.edu

center's emergency-response phone tree went into effect. The explosion occurred close to the nursing shift change, so many nurses stayed as the night shift was walking in. Within the hospital, doctors and staff immediately assumed their designated disaster roles and started preparing for the flood of critically wounded—making room by discharging anyone who was strong enough to go home, moving gurneys into position, checking supplies and waiting.

As the trauma center worked to save lives, Memorial CEO Bob Colvin was working to save

residents falling into that category.

These uninsured citizens, who often pass other hospitals to get to Memorial, have limited healthcare options in Savannah. Currently, three clinics serve this growing population: The Curtis V. Cooper Health Clinic on Robert Street, the Union Mission on Fahm Street and the Community Health Mission on Eisenhower Drive. But Memorial bears the biggest brunt.

"We still serve more low-income uninsured people in our emergency room than in those three existing clinics combined," says Colvin. "About half of what we see in our emergency

