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Sanger Heart Doctors Vote to Sell

By Karen Garloch, The Charlotte Observer, Charlotte, North Carolina

Doctors with Sanger Clinic, Charlotte's oldest and largest group of cardiologists and heart surgeons, have voted to become part of Carolinas HealthCare System. The sale will be completed by March 31.

Sanger doctors have been the sole providers of cardiac care at Carolinas Medical Center for many years. But now most of the group's 60 doctors and nearly 400 staffers will become employees of the largest public hospital system in the Southeast.

The exceptions are two surgeons and five cardiologists in Sanger's Gastonia office who announced Wednesday they will become employees of CaroMont Medical Group, the physician practice division of CaroMont Health, which owns Gaston Memorial Hospital.

Also, Dr. Craig Greene, a pediatric cardiologist at Sanger, will leave the practice, said Sanger President Dr. Paul Colavita.

Patients will not notice a difference, officials said Wednesday.

"Basically they'll still call the same phone number. They'll still come and see the same doctors," said Sanger administrator Stephen Wagner.

Wagner said Sanger is financially strong, and that the move will enable the clinic and the hospital to better coordinate care and plan for the future.

Colavita said having a larger partner will help Sanger to maintain its satellite locations, recruit doctors to smaller towns outside Charlotte and continue acquiring the latest technology, such as CT scanners and magnetic resonance imaging equipment for diagnosing heart problems.

"The way I'm looking at it, it's two great organizations getting together to do even better things," Colavita said.

In addition to the Gastonia office, Sanger has 10 locations, three in Charlotte and one each in the Lake Norman area, Boone, Shelby, Lincolnton, Monroe, Forest City and Rock Hill.

The late Dr. Paul Sanger started performing heart surgery in 1946 at Charlotte Memorial Hospital, now Carolinas Medical. In 1956, he recruited a young Hungarian surgeon, Dr. Francis Robicsek, who developed the region's first heart-lung machine and who, with Dr. Frederick Taylor, performed the first open-heart operation in the hospital.

Robicsek founded the Sanger Clinic in 1968.

He and associates performed the first heart transplant in Charlotte in 1986.

Robicsek, who was president of the group for many years, retired from surgery in 1998 and remains chairman of the board.

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