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May. 02, 2008  
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**Liver-disease specialist hired**  
**Part-time help set for gastroenterologists**

By JENNIFER ROBISON  
REVIEW-JOURNAL



A local medical practice announced an agreement to bring in a part-time liver-disease specialist from a prominent [California](#) hospital system.

Hepatologist [Dr. Donald Hillebrand](#), medical director of liver transplantation at [Scripps Green Hospital](#) and the [Scripps Center for Organ and Cell Transplantation](#) in [San Diego](#), will offer care through Southwest Medical Associates of [Las Vegas](#) starting May 9.

Hillebrand will join the three-doctor gastroenterology team at Southwest Medical Associates, a 250-doctor practice with 12 area offices, on Thursdays and Fridays.

It's a key addition to a city with no physicians focusing exclusively on liver disease, said [Dr. Joseph Kaufman](#), president of Southwest Medical Associates and chief medical officer of [Sierra Health Services](#), the insurance company that owns Southwest Medical Associates.

Kaufman said Wednesday that the arrangement had been under discussion for several months, but company officials expedited the deal after revelations in February that a gastroenterology practice had infected patients with hepatitis C during endoscopies and colonoscopies.

"The hepatitis C issue that surfaced certainly was a catalyst to moving things along," he said. "We recognized there would be an increased volume of patients who need services, and if those services could be provided locally, that would be preferable to sending patients out of town."

Southwest Medical Associates already had agreements to refer local liver-transplant patients to Scripps hospitals in California, as well as to Loma Linda University Medical Center in Loma Linda, Calif., because no doctors perform liver transplants here. But the practice's managers wanted a local link to initiating and guiding treatment of patients with complicated liver ailments.

The contract gives Scripps several benefits, Hillebrand said. First, it will help establish Scripps as the transplant program for Las Vegas, he said.

Plus, it will help Scripps doctors evaluate the need for transplants without requiring patients to travel to California.

More important than those advantages, however, is the opportunity to restore the patient faith that suffered after the endoscopy-related hepatitis outbreak, Hillebrand said.

"We're being told by local physicians that there's a loss of trust in the medical community in Las Vegas," he said. "It's a tragedy what's going on in Las Vegas, with the erosion of trust in physicians here. It's important to have someone with a Scripps reputation come in and work with local physicians to provide care that was already sorely needed here in Las Vegas."

The Southern Nevada Health District says about 50,000 patients who had procedures at the Endoscopy Center of Southern Nevada and its related practices might have been exposed to hepatitis C and HIV after nurses and doctors reused vials of anesthetic on multiple patients. The agency has recommended that people who had procedures at the center between March 2004 and Jan. 11 get tested for the blood-borne diseases.

Local attorneys say hundreds of clients who plan to sue the practice have tested positive for hepatitis C, though the health district has

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officially linked just eight cases to the clinics so far.

Hillebrand estimated he could see 15 to 20 patients a day in Las Vegas. If demand proves greater, Scripps could supplement the practice with another part-time physician, he said.

Patients who aren't insured through Sierra Health Services will be able to schedule visits with Hillebrand, but Sierra Health clients will receive priority.

Kaufman wouldn't disclose the contract's cost.

Contact reporter Jennifer Robison at [jrobison@reviewjournal.com](mailto:jrobison@reviewjournal.com) or 702-380-4512.

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