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Academy, VA Team Up for Ambulatory Surgery Services

Ann Patton | U.S. Air Force Academy Public Affairs

April 13, 2010

A \$14-million cooperative venture between officials from the U.S. Air Force Academy and the Department of Veterans Affairs, funded by the Department of Defense and VA's Joint Incentive Fund, will bring much-needed ambulatory surgical care to veterans in southern Colorado.

Medical procedures for urology, ophthalmology, orthopedics, ear, nose and throat and general surgery are scheduled to commence for veterans May 1.

"It's all about the vets," said Col. Leslie Ness, the 10th Surgical Operations Squadron administrator. "The biggest thing is that our veterans don't have to travel long distances."

She stressed the additional medical services on base will also alleviate long waits for procedures.

Previously such services were limited to facilities in Denver, and veterans from southern Colorado were forced to travel to Denver for surgical care as well as for the procedures themselves.

Tentative planning originally called for construction of a new building to house the surgical services in Colorado Springs, Colo., but Colonel Ness said the costs proved prohibitive.

Medical staff from the Academy and the VA will work together as one team.

The VA will provide seven registered nurses, two technicians, three nurse anesthetists and surgeons, said Lt. Col. Suzanne Quirao, the squadron operations officer. They will join the Academy's 19 active-duty surgeons, plus Academy nurses and technicians and the joint operation will also include services to families, she said.

Before the 10th Medical Group underwent changes under the 2005 Base Realignment and Closure, the facility had five operating rooms available, but two were converted for other uses. With the expansion of services to veterans, those two rooms will once again be used for their original intended purpose.

Veteran medical services at the downtown Spruce Street VA facility will continue, and the VA will verify eligibility and make referrals for ambulatory surgical services.

"Things haven't changed," Colonel Ness said. "We will still have all the surgical specialties we had before."

The cooperative venture will also provide additional overlap for all surgical care.

"It will preserve the longevity of ambulatory surgery here in southern Colorado," she said. The staff additions will allow surgical operations to operate independently, even with deployments and down times.

Preparing for the joint venture has required time and painstaking planning but has been worth it, she said.

"It has been a herculean task, but in the end, our VA beneficiaries and tax payers will reap the huge benefits with this project," she said.