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Heart of the Matter

By Marie Freeman, writer for *The Watauga Democrat*

While in Kitty Hawk the rest of North Carolina celebrated the 100th anniversary of the Wright Brothers' flight, the staff at Watauga Medical Center launched a first flight of their own Wednesday when the doors to its permanent heart catheterization lab opened for business.

"This is a huge improvement in the quality of cardiac care that we can offer the people of our region," Jerry Moretz, vice president of development for Watauga Medical Center said.

A heart catheterization- or cath exam- is a diagnostic procedure in which a doctor inserts a tube into an artery or vein in the groin area of a patient and from there injects dye into the coronary arteries enabling doctors to see blocked arteries.

So far, 1900 cathes have been performed in Watauga County since the early 1990s. However, all have been performed in the mobile cath lab that rested in the parking lot of the hospital on a twice-a-week schedule.

"The advantage of having the permanent lab is that when a patient needs a heart cath, the lab and staff is here at Watauga Medical all the time," Moretz said.

Dr. Peter Ashline with The Sanger Clinic performed the lab's first cath early Wednesday morning. The procedure took about 30 minutes and was performed on an outpatient basis.

According to Moretz, the permanent facility cost just under \$2 million and has been in the hospital's plans for five years and is part of the hospital's larger improvement project. For the past two years, more than \$170,000 has been donated to the cath lab construction with proceeds from the Hound Ears Club golf tournaments.

The lab will be managed by MedCath Corporation, a provider of cardiovascular services.

The inner workings of the lab include a General Electric Innova 2000, a digital cardiovascular imaging system that produces state-of-the-art images which allow cardiologists to view hard to see blood vessels.

"Our region has a fairly high number of heart patients and we project that the number will grow in the next couple of years. It became prudent for us to build the cath lab," Moretz said.

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