

ALS clinic at Crestwood is 'team approach' to disease

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Patients able to see several specialists during single visit

The ALS Association has opened its first Alabama clinic at Crestwood Medical Center.

Conceived several years ago, the monthly clinic allows people with Lou Gehrig's disease to see a team of medical specialists on a single afternoon.

That's a godsend for local ALS patients like Patrick Anderson, who learned last May he has the fatal neuromuscular disease. He was first in line when the Huntsville clinic opened April 15.

"It was nice being able to go to one appointment instead of having to schedule six different appointments," said Anderson, 40, of Madison. "I completed in half a day what would have taken me a month to do.

"The clinic's going to make things a lot easier for me."

Marcia Obermann, a registered nurse from Huntsville whose son has ALS, is serving as patient coordinator for the clinic.

She said research has shown ALS patients treated at "multidisciplinary" clinics extend their quality of life by a year, on average.

Managing the fast-moving disorder takes "a team approach," said Obermann, who helped found the local ALS Association chapter in 2004. "If delays happen, the disease gets ahead of you ?and it means more pain and suffering than they already have to endure."

Obermann said she knows several ALS patients who have fallen and broken arms and noses because they did not receive a wheelchair in time.

ALS stands for amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. The muscle-wasting disorder afflicts an estimated 30,000 Americans, including 400 in Alabama.

The local clinic is being staffed by neurologists Tejanand Mulpur and Aruna Arora, plus a registered nurse, registered dietitian, social worker and respiratory, speech, physical and occupational therapists.

Other medical specialists are also available to see patients, including a pulmonologist, gastroenterologist and ear, nose and throat expert.

While the Muscular Dystrophy Association has had an ALS clinic in Birmingham for several years, the nearest ALS Association clinic until now was at Atlanta's Emory University. The nonprofit agency has 34 certified multidisciplinary clinics across the country.

Dr. Pam Hudson, Crestwood's chief executive officer, said she hopes the Huntsville clinic will eventually be certified by the national ALS group.

"The goal is not to replace a patient's primary caregiver," she said Tuesday, "but to augment that and provide another resource to help patients cope with this disease."

Hudson said Crestwood will make sure patients who need more advanced care, such as surgery to insert a feeding tube when they can no longer swallow, get help immediately.

"We'll try to make it happen in a way that's more convenient for the families," she said. "The whole goal is to serve the patients."

For now, doctors plan to see three to six ALS patients per clinic day.

Janet Wright, executive director of the local ALS Association office, said she expects those living with Lou Gehrig's disease to make good use of the clinic.

"We also think there will be people coming to the clinic from Georgia and Tennessee," she said.