

Help for a Heartsick Region

BY RHODA WEISS

West Virginia residents have the highest incidence of heart disease and one of the shortest life expectancies in the nation. To meet the healthcare needs of such a population, St. Mary's Hospital in Huntington has developed one of the most highly rated cardiac bypass programs in the United States and launched a comprehensive wellness program for area residents 55 years of age or older.

TARGETED CAMPAIGN

Until recently, many in the area remained unaware of the quality of the services the hospital offered. "In May 1990 we were listed in the *Wall Street Journal* as one of the top 10 cardiac bypass hospitals in the United States based on mortality rates in Medicare cases," says Tamara Perdue, St. Mary's director of public relations. Market research showed, however, that, although most physicians and consumers realized St. Mary's had a good heart program, few were aware just how good the program really was.

In 1991 Perdue led a successful campaign that informed people about the benefits of St. Mary's heart program and consequently increased the number of open-heart surgeries. "The healthcare market is very competitive in our immediate area, but we also serve a large, 28-county region with several rural hospitals that do not offer extensive heart services," explains Perdue. "The article allowed us to send the region's physicians a clear message about the caliber of our heart program, and the referrals soon increased."

St. Mary's heart campaign targeted referral sources and heart patients with the clear message, "Don't take unnecessary chances with your heart; bring it to a national leader in cardiac care." A four-week newspaper campaign informed heart patients they did not need to travel far from home for high-quality heart care, since one of the nation's best programs was in their backyard. Referring physicians were sent copies of the *Wall Street Journal* article. "In 1990 we performed



*Ms. Weiss is
president, Rhoda
Weiss Marketing
and Public
Relations,
Santa Monica,
CA.*

346 open-heart surgeries. Following the campaign in 1991, the number increased to 517," says Perdue.

According to Perdue, the hospital's biggest hurdle in 1991 was maintaining the quality of its services. The number of cardiologists and open-heart surgeons remained the same, while the cardiac nursing staff increased only slightly. "Although we were excited about the dramatic increase, we wanted to ensure that we could maintain the high-quality personal care our program's reputation was built on."

The campaign also increased utilization of other "heart services" offered by St. Mary's such as cardiac catheterization and angioplasties. "While the campaign focused on our open-heart program, it also drew attention to our Regional Heart Center and all of our heart services under the same umbrella," Perdue notes.

NEW CHALLENGE

Late 1991 brought a new challenge to St. Mary's marketing department. "A competing hospital located close to St. Mary's unveiled a new open-heart program that had the potential to capture as much as 37 percent of our patient base," says Perdue. "We wanted to keep our market share, but we were concerned that we couldn't maintain the quality of our heart program if we generated another campaign that would cause a second rapid influx of patients."

The hospital opted to redesign the first campaign, positioning St. Mary's as the clear-cut leader with more than 12 years' experience in open-heart surgeries and a nationally recognized program. Another four-week newspaper advertisement campaign assisted in maintaining a stronghold on the region's heart market.

"We were fortunate because we had all of the right pieces to the puzzle—great heart surgeons with high standards, an excellent cardiac nursing staff, and superb support from all sides of the program, including cardiologists and perfusionists," says Perdue.

WELLNESS PROGRAM

But St. Mary's also realized that diagnosis and treatment are not enough, that it must do its part to prevent heart disease and other illnesses. Market research shows that the majority of St. Mary's patients are over age 45. So last year the hospital began the Healthy 55 Wellness Program, which offers members free health checks, educational programs, social activities, discounts, and other benefits.

St. Mary's campaign began in June with a direct mail piece, a newspaper campaign, and minimal use of television advertisements to introduce Healthy 55. Within the first week more than 1,000 seniors joined the program.

In just a few months, St. Mary's had registered more than 4,500 members. "This program is a great example of how building relationships can be a win-win situation for the consumer and the hospital," says Perdue. "We have a data base of more than 4,500 consumers with a wide range of medical needs. Healthy 55 helps our seniors, and they help support several of St. Mary's other services. When they have a medical need, they turn to us." As a result of the program, the number of physician referrals has increased dramatically in the past five months, improving St. Mary's relationships with its physicians.

Healthy 55 members have access to a number of wellness services offered by the hospital. Program coordinator Jane Whaley often calls on the hospital's speakers bureau to provide educational programming for seniors in areas such as estate planning, survival after the loss of a spouse, and living wills and medical power of attorney. "We also invite our Healthy 55 members to participate in other hospital activities such as the 'Healthy Hearts Club' and special events."

As Perdue looks to the future of healthcare marketing, she feels the roles hospitals currently play may change dramatically. "As healthcare marketers, we need to realize that helping people stay healthy may very well be the most important service a hospital can provide in the 1990s." □

Don't take unnecessary chances with your heart. Bring it to a national leader in cardiac care.

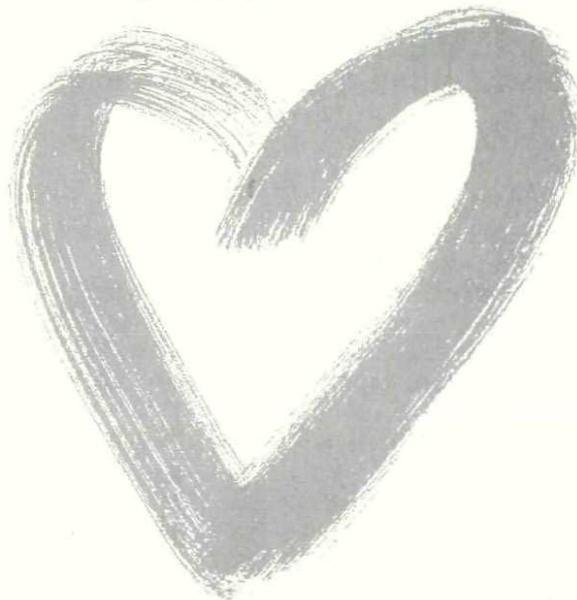
In 1990 an article in the *Wall Street Journal* featured a report by the Center for Medical Consumers naming St. Mary's Hospital among the top 10 cardiac bypass hospitals in the country.*

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With more than 12 years of experience, St. Mary's Regional Heart Center has performed over 10,000 cardiac catheterizations and 3,000 open heart surgeries. St. Mary's provides the most complete program in the Tri-State Region offering cardiac catheterization, angioplasty, direct coronary atherectomy, open heart surgery, a dedicated open heart recovery unit, a cardiac intensive care unit and rehabilitation program. Isn't it reassuring to know a nationally recognized cardiac leader is so close to home?

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For more information about programs offered by St. Mary's Regional Heart Center call (304) 526-1253.



St. Mary's Regional Heart Center

2900 First Avenue, Huntington, W.V. 25702
(304) 526-1253

*Based on 1987 mortality rates for coronary-artery bypass surgery in Medicare patients in hospitals performing at least 30 procedures a year.

St. Mary's 1991 marketing campaign focused on its 12 years' experience in open-heart surgery.