

Lurie, Rush unveil pediatric care pact

The new clinical partnership aims to improve quality and make it easier to access treatment.

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Lurie Children's Hospital and the Rush University System for Health are joining forces to advance pediatric care and better compete for young patients. The move comes as hospitals deal with the financial fallout from the coronavirus and manage a logistically challenging vaccine rollout.

The clinical partnership announced today, which takes effect Feb. 1, aims to improve quality, enhance the overall patient experience and make it easier to access treatment. While financial terms of the deal were not disclosed, hospital leaders said the goal is to increase efficiencies, control costs and improve quality of care.

For Rush, affiliating with Lurie—long recognized as one of the best children's hospitals in the country—could mean gaining a foothold in the highly competitive pediatric market. For Lurie, teaming up with Rush's three-hospital network could mean more opportunities for referrals. Discussions on teaming up began in November 2019.

Lurie will maintain its academic affiliation with Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine.

While the agreement covers pediatric services at Rush University Medical Center on the Near

West Side, as well as outpatient pediatric services at other locations, it does not include Rush Copley Medical Center in Aurora.

Lurie's narrow focus on pediatrics presents an additional challenge during the pandemic. Unlike its top rivals, which are part of expansive health care chains, the 364-bed Streeterville hospital can't offset patient volume and revenue declines with large numbers of COVID-19 cases and big pots of CARES Act funding.

"We realized we had an opportunity in working together with the scale of our organizations to touch more kids and to really have a transformative impact on the pediatric landscape in Chicago," Lurie CEO Dr. Tom Shanley said.

Meanwhile, even before COVID started spreading, health systems like Rush were under pressure to compete for a dwindling number of complex pediatric cases, all while becoming more efficient and reining in medical costs.

As more kids are treated in less-expensive outpatient settings, a number of local hospitals—including UChicago Medicine's Ingalls Memorial Hospital in Harvey and St. Bernard Hospital in Englewood—have closed their inpatient pediatric units.

Rush CEO Ranga Krishnan acknowledges there's a mismatch between capacity and the needs of children in the state. For example, he said Rush University Medical Center's state-of-the-art 60-bed neonatal intensive care unit has more capacity than patients. (The hospital has a total of 98 pediatric beds.)

The pair also will look to better address social determinants of health, which is something they've worked toward as members of West Side United, a coalition of hospitals focused on improving health outcomes in West Side neighborhoods.

"Both organizations realize what's required to drive those kinds of outstanding outcomes, which is a really strong commitment and infrastructure around quality and patient safety," Shanley said. "And how data drives that, which is something Rush has done exceptionally well through the years. And how research advances our understanding. It puts practitioners and specialists at the edge of pediatric medicine."

Krishnan and Shanley said they're open to expanding their partnership to include other health care providers in the future, if it's in the interest of what's best for patients and communities.

Another focus for the pair will be address the pediatric mental health crisis that has been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Lurie and Rush aren't the only pediatric partnership in town. Advocate Aurora Health's Advocate Children's Hospital, University of Chicago Medicine's Comer Children's Hospital and NorthShore University HealthSystem's pediatric division have collaborated since 2018 to promote access to specialized services and better attract younger patients.