TMH opens new genetics center

By Dave Hodges
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With the opening of a new center in Tallahassee, patients will have the advantage of genetics in diagnosing diseases they are likely to have and in planning the best treatments.

Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare's Clinical Genetics Center will provide genetic services for both pediatric and adult patients. The center, the first of its kind in the area, will use the latest clinical practice in the use of genetics to diagnose and treat a variety of illnesses, including heart disease and cancer.

"This is a new and growing field. We just unraveled the human genome 10 years ago, so we are discovering new therapies, effective diagnoses and treatments," says Dr. Lea Kristin Parsley, medical director.

For Parsley, who began her medical career in primary care and rural health, genetics has a personal side with her. She and her husband Marcus adopted a child from the Inner Mongolia region of China when the youngster was 2. He had a genetic form of spina bifida.

"It kind of changed my direction in medicine," she said. "I had originally focused on pediatric medicine."

The experience heightened her interest in diseases that have genetic origins and in caring for special-needs patients.

Through the testing that the center will offer, patients will be able to confirm if they have a predisposition for a certain disease and how to go about managing it most effectively if symptoms develop.

"It allows you to focus your treatment, which is more effective," said Dr. Dean Watson, TMH's chief medical officer.

Another advantage is early detection. If a genetic test indicates the potential for a certain disease, such as breast cancer, the patient can be screened much earlier in life, Parsley said.

For years, Tallahassee families have had access to geneticist Dr. Roderick F. Hume, who specializes in prenatal genetics. The new center expands the genetic services available locally by providing treatment needed at any point after birth, Parsley said.