

Dream team: Clinic in stadium's shadow will bring teaching hospital care to suburbs -- and pose new challenge for community medical centers

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By Christopher Rowland
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The same doctors who treat Tom Brady , Tedy Bruschi , and other New England Patriots players will soon be available to examine the knee your kid sprained at soccer practice.

Dr. Bertram Zarins and Dr. Thomas J. Gill , Massachusetts General Hospital orthopedic surgeons who serve as Patriots team doctors, will be among the marquee physicians who will work next year at a new sports medicine center and outpatient surgical clinic in Foxborough, part of the Patriot Place commercial complex the Kraft family is building around Gillette Stadium.

The Patriots, Mass. General, and Brigham and Women's are teaming up to create a potent partnership that will draw sports-crazed suburban families to the Foxborough center -- in a location that puts it in the middle of a healthcare turf war between Boston's academic medical centers and suburban community hospitals. The Route 1 site is nestled perfectly among towns that have exploded with subdivisions, and it's also near the intersection of major interstate highways (routes 495 and 95), making it easy to receive Harvard-caliber medical care close to home, hospital and team officials said.

"Certainly Gillette Stadium at this point is iconic. There is a potential for benefit for any company that puts itself next to the stadium," said Andrew Zimbalist , an economics professor at Smith College who specializes in the business of sports. "With a sports medicine facility, it sounds like a match made in heaven."

But community hospital officials in Massachusetts said it is another example of academic medical centers from Boston using their deep pockets and reputations for advanced treatment to strip the highest-paying services -- such as MRIs and outpatient surgical procedures -- out of local hospitals.

"We should really be competing against disease, and not competing against each other," said John Chessare , interim chief executive of Caritas Christi Health Care , the hospital chain owned by the Archdiocese of Boston that includes Caritas Norwood Hospital , which is just nine miles from Gillette Stadium and Patriot Place.

"There are some academic medical centers in our market that have a phenomenal brand, and this phenomenal brand gives them phenomenal market clout," he said. "The playing field is not level."

The objections are not uniform. A little more than 12 miles to the south on Route 95, Sturdy Memorial Hospital in Attleboro said it does not anticipate undue competition, based on assurances given to chief executive Linda Shyavitz by Patriots management.

"Our CEO had a conversation with the construction manager for Patriot Place several months ago and was told that the surgi-center would be an extension of the sports medicine capabilities the Patriots already have. Based upon that, we anticipate no impact," hospital spokeswoman Lisa McCluskie said in an e-mail.

Sturdy Memorial and Morton Hospital in Taunton announced in March that they are teaming up to provide an advanced oncology radiation outpatient center in Mansfield, which is next to Foxborough.

Gary Gottlieb , chief executive of Brigham and Women’s Hospital, said the goal of the new facility was to make it more convenient for residents of the southern suburbs to get care from Brigham and Mass. General doctors. The academic medical centers occupy highly congested neighborhoods in Boston, where traffic and parking problems are massive, he said. Moreover, he said, the Gillette Stadium site is even more convenient than the locations of community hospitals in the vicinity, Gottlieb added.

“Where the community hospitals are, is not always where the highways are, so that means there’s an opportunity,” he said. “We would love to work collaboratively with the community hospitals.”

The debate swirling around the Patriots healthcare development in Foxborough is a mirror image of a debate taking place on the North Shore, where Mass. General is a partner in an outpatient ambulatory care center in Danvers. The project has drawn sharp objections from Northeast Health System , which owns Beverly Hospital.

Mass. General already owns an outpatient facility in Waltham, in the western suburbs. Now, the Foxborough facility will allow Partners HealthCare -- the parent corporation for Mass. General and the Brigham -- to complete a competitive horseshoe around the greater Boston area and draw from as far south as Rhode Island.

Other academic medical centers are getting into the act. Tufts-New England Medical Center plans to build a suburban facility on a site that has yet to be chosen; it has been reviewing sites in Waltham and Westwood. Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center is teaming up with New England Baptist Hospital to establish satellite orthopedics services at the Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital-Needham.

Many NFL teams, as well as other teams, have sponsorship deals with large hospitals in the market, with naming rights. But the idea of linking pro football and academic medicine in a new business venture at a stadium is new, said Ted Fire , director of project administration for the Patriots.

In the case of the Patriots development around Gillette, the Kraft family wanted a medical office building because it increases the number of potential shoppers and restaurant diners traveling to the complex, Fire said: “It feeds the rest of the center.”

The healthcare building will be four stories tall and visible from both the stadium and Route 1. At 100,000 square feet, the Foxborough center will be less than half the size of a small community hospital, but it will provide care in some of the most lucrative specialties. It will have four operating rooms and a collection of advanced imaging machines.

Team doctors, Zarins and Gill, will be treating patients at the facility part time, and at least two more orthopedic doctors from Mass. General will also be treating there, both for sports medicine and other types of orthopedic care.

The Brigham, meanwhile, will field up to 25 primary care doctors, cardiologists, surgeons, plastic surgeons, radiologists, and other specialists. The Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital Network, which has Patriots player Bruschi as a celebrity spokesman, also is expected to occupy some space.

In all, up to 30 doctors will work at the facility, most splitting their time between Foxborough and their practices at the downtown academic medical centers.