

Willis-Knighton, LSUMC to begin performing heart transplants

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Physicians from Willis-Knighton Medical Center Tuesday vowed to provide heart transplants to viable candidates regardless of their ability to pay for the operation.

Following the announcement that Willis-Knighton and LSU Medical Center jointly will establish a heart transplantation center, Dr. Michael Futrell, Willis-Knighton's chief of cardiology, said that when uninsured patients cannot afford the operation, "Willis Knighton will pay."

The operation usually costs between \$80,000 and \$100,000, but can cost as much as \$300,000 depending on the condition of the patient, according to Dr. Jane Eggerstedt, chief of cardiovascular surgery at LSU Medical Center.

The LSU-Willis Knighton Heart Transplantation Center will be ready for the first patient as early as September, officials from both institutions said during a Tuesday afternoon press conference. Dr. Mohsin Hakim of the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., will join the LSUMC staff Aug. 1 as an

associate professor of surgery and heart transplant surgeon.

About 90 hospitals in the country perform heart transplants. The only other facility in Louisiana offering the operation is the Oschner Medical Foundation Hospital in New Orleans. Tuesday, Futrell said that Willis Knighton and LSU Medical Center together refer about 16-18 patients each year to Oschner or to programs in Houston for heart transplantation.

Under the agreement, Willis-Knighton will offer the clinical facilities — the operating rooms and recovery rooms — while LSU Medical

Center will provide the transplant surgeons.

Dr. John McDonald, in a prepared statement at the press conference, said that "it should be emphasized that under this agreement heart transplants will be available to Louisiana citizens who are appropriate candidates for this procedure regardless of financial considerations." The procedure is no longer considered experimental, and is covered by many insurance plans, said Dr. Stanford Shelby, Willis-Knighton's chief of cardiovascular surgery.

No candidate has yet been identified

to be the first heart transplant patient at the new center.

The announcement comes amid tentative plans to relocate LSUMC's entire transplant program to Willis-Knighton, McDonald said after the

press conference that regarding kidney and liver transplants, the two institutions "have come to sort of a basic agreement, but that agreement has to be approved by the entire LSU system."