

High-publicity cases spotlight Kaleida

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Kaleida Health has hit the kind of publicity jackpot that most hospitals can only hope for: two high-profile cases involving life-threatening injuries to sympathetic characters that ended with the best possible results.

Could all that be leveraged into something big?

While the patients - professional athletes Kevin Everett and Richard Zednik - were being cared for, media the world over covered their progress. Kaleida's Web sites were getting an enormous volume of hits; e-mail and traditional mail were pouring into the facilities for the athletes.

And when they were discharged, Everett and Zednik went on to proclaim the quality of care they received. Millard Fillmore Gates Circle Hospital, where Buffalo Bill Everett was treated for his spinal cord injury in September, and

Buffalo General Hospital, where National Hockey League player Zednik was taken when his carotid artery was slashed during a game earlier this month, were mentioned by name in print and broadcast reports nationally and internationally. Everett even wrote a book about his injury and promoted it during an appearance on "The Oprah Winfrey Show."

Kaleida clearly has heightened its profile well beyond its Western New York base. It could merely enjoy its good fortune, or the health system could use the recent events to build a wider, perhaps national, reputation for providing quality care.

The prospect might be tempting. Kaleida is in negotiations with Erie County Medical Center to consolidate specialty services into centers of excellence and build a new facility for heart and vascular procedures. A national reputation might enhance those efforts.

"Of course, a national reputation, if you can achieve it, benefits everyone. You probably get more private-pay patients. That boosts the bottom line and maybe salary and benefits and, of course, pride in the organization," said Anthony Cirillo of Fast Forward, Strategic Planning & Marketing Consulting LLC in North Carolina.

Kaleida President and CEO James Kaskie said the health system is struggling with how to capture the recent events to raise the bar of awareness. The initial focus, however, is likely to stay in Western New York to retain those patients who leave the region for care.

Local insurers declined to release claims data of patients who sought treatment outside Western New York, but area health-care providers have pointed to

the patient migration as a long-standing challenge.

"We have to demonstrate the value of Kaleida to the community," Kaskie said, "that this kind of care doesn't happen because it was a hockey player."

National hospital marketing experts said a local approach is the correct approach.

"It would seem you market (in Buffalo) first and play to world-class service available right here in Buffalo. Build from local to national. It takes a huge effort and a bit of realism," Cirillo said. "Health care is by and large a local phenomenon, even with consumer-directed health care and people supposedly shopping on price and quality. There are only a select group of hospitals that people will go to if they cannot get care locally that is appropriate."

It takes generations to achieve national brand equity, Cirillo said. Even well-known institutions such as the Cleveland Clinic actively market to attract people from across the country because they are a Cleveland area facility, despite the name recognition, he said.

Dr. Robert Holzhauer, Univera Healthcare chief medical officer, said the two athletes received top-notch care, but as trauma cases they don't necessarily warrant a national reputation. They're best used to drum up more Western New York business, he said.

Though a local approach is correct, the hospital system still needs to craft a careful, subtle message around the events, if it wants to do that at all, said Patrick Buckley, a national health-care consultant based in Milwaukee. "Publicity like this is best handled through third-party vehicles. Personally, I believe it would be a mistake for the hospital to capitalize on it. The public doesn't like it when these things are brought into a big advertising campaign," said Buckley, author of "The Complete Guide to Hospital Marketing," released last September.

The local message to seek care in your own backyard also needs to speak to referring physicians who wield the most power on where patients get their care. Those patterns are long established and unlikely to be budged based on two high-profile cases, said Dr. Jay Pomerantz, chief medical officer at BlueCross BlueShield of Western New York.

"The struggle is that many practicing physicians have set referral patterns and it's hard to break that," Pomerantz said. "Many physicians will react to one bad outcome, or one good outcome, and that will be their only perspective on care. With that limited, subjective information, they will base their referral decisions. It's a challenge."