Papers signed: Sharon Hospital now part of Health Quest
SHARON — The hallways were buzzing with activity at Sharon Hospital on Tuesday, Aug. 1, but happily not because of any kind of massive health incident.

On Tuesday, the hospital officially joined the Health Quest group. Administrative and medical staff were busy throughout the day changing their email addresses, getting new identification cards, doing all kinds of tedious paperwork.

“I had to have the IT department come in and get my printer working,” hospital CEO Peter Cordeau said. “I’m exhausted, but I’ll tell you, we began the process of switching over at midnight and 99 percent of it worked really well.”

Support of FCH instrumental

The partnership with New York-based Health Quest has been in the works for about two years, according to Nancy Heaton, chief executive officer of the Foundation for Community Health in Sharon.

The foundation was created with money from the sale in 2002 of Sharon Hospital to Essent Corporation. At that time, the hospital converted from a not-for-profit to a for-profit institution.

One of the conditions the state of Connecticut had imposed on the hospital at that time was that the foundation be created with money from the sale, and that it remain a nonprofit. Its mission is to “improve the health and well-being of residents of our area,” Heaton said.

The foundation was instrumental in helping Health Quest purchase Sharon Hospital from its present owner, RCCH (formerly Essent Health Care of Tennessee).

The foundation contributed $3 million toward the $5 million purchase of Sharon Hospital by Health Quest from RCCH, Heaton said. That money transferred at the closing of the deal on July 31.

Next, Heaton said, “we have guaranteed to give up to $6 million over the next four years to Health Quest for improvements specifically to Sharon Hospital, not to other hospitals in the Health Quest group.”

Other Health Quest hospitals include Vassar Brothers Medical Center in Poughkeepsie and Northern Dutchess Hospital in Rhinebeck.

Health Quest will have to spend the money for improvements first; the foundation will then reimburse Health Quest at a rate of 50 cents for every dollar spent in Sharon.

Health Quest will give the foundation a 4 percent return, annually for the next 10 years, on any money it contributes (beginning with the $3 million the foundation gave for the purchase).

The foundation will also help Health Quest find donors and sources of financial support in the community for future growth at Sharon Hospital.
New doctors already in

Some of the growth is already beginning, Cordeau said. Cardiac care, for example, has expanded, with Sharon’s Dr. Donald Soucier joining Health Quest’s Heart Center in July (but continuing his practice in Sharon).

Sharon Hospital patients now can get access to the larger Heart Center staff and services as well.

“By the end of this month, we expect to have Dr. Elvis Rema, a specialist in pain management, here,” Cordeau said. The pain program will debut in Sharon but is then expected to expand to other Health Quest hospitals.

Work is also beginning to link up, for example, the gynecology and obstetrics group in Sharon with other doctors and providers in the Health Quest system.

The idea, Cordeau said, is for patients here to have more choices and for the doctors to be working collaboratively, not in competition with each other.

An outside company called Em Cares will continue to provide emergency department services at the hospital, at least for now.

One goal with the Health Quest partnership is that some patients from the Hudson Valley area will come to Sharon for simpler procedures. The more complex cases will go to Vassar Brothers.

Sharon Hospital is also on track to become a teaching hospital.

Access re-opens to NY state

One of the biggest changes for patients that comes with the Health Quest partnership is that Sharon Hospital will once again be able to accept health insurance from New York patients. The Affordable Care Act wouldn’t let many insurance plans cross the border, cutting patients off from the closest hospital to their homes — and cutting Sharon Hospital off from a large pool of potential patients.

“There are no guarantees of course that every plan will accept us,” Cordeau said, “but in general that border should be wiped away now, so that we can work with HMOs and exchanges from New York.”

Cordeau said he and Health Quest will now work “quickly to implement our strategic plan and make services available to the community.”

He will lose one of his biggest allies at the hospital this month, when CFO Christian Bergeron leaves on Aug. 11. Cordeau and Bergeron have worked closely together since 2015. They have been friends since college.

“We knew in the beginning of these conversations that finance is centralized in Poughkeepsie with Health Quest,” Cordeau said. “Christian already travels a long distance to get to Sharon; the additional travel time to Poughkeepsie was too much. Geographically, it just wasn’t going to work for him.

“He’s quite a talent and he’s going to be missed dearly. He deserves praise for the enormous amount of work he did on the Certificate of Need to the state, which allowed us to return to not-for-profit status and join Health Quest; and for the work he did on integrating the hospital with Health Quest. He’s a great guy and he’s going to do wonderful things wherever he ends up going.”

New hospital board

Local support for Cordeau will now have to come mainly from the 15-member hospital board. As part of the deal with Health Quest, the Foundation for Community Health was allowed to select 12 of the 15 board members; Cordeau is the 13th member. Health Quest contributes two people to the board.

Heaton said it took four months of intensive work to put together a “diverse group of people from New York and Connecticut.”

Joel Jones of Falls Village is the new board chairman. The other members are Arthur J. Bassin, Richard Cantele Jr., Pari Forood, Hugh A. Hill, Susan Iovino, Dr. William M. Kirber, Kathryn Palmer-House, James Andrew Quella, Kenneth Schechter, Pierce Sioussat, Dr. Donald Soucier (Medical Staff President) and Miriam Tannen.