Appalachian Regional Healthcare (ARH), Appalachian Heart Center (AHC) and UK HealthCare’s Gill Heart Institute are working together to deliver the highest quality cardiovascular care to residents of Eastern Kentucky.

Heart disease is one of the leading causes of death in Kentucky. Perry County, the focal point of the UK Gill Heart Institute’s current efforts, has the highest incidence of heart disease in the state and is surrounded by counties that have far more death from heart disease than the Kentucky average (Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky, 2008).

“Together, we can accomplish more in Eastern Kentucky than either organization could ever do alone,” said Edward Setser, MD, UK cardiothoracic (CT) surgeon, assistant professor of surgery and director of UK Gill Heart Institute – ARH Hazard. Setser began performing CT procedures — including coronary revascularization and heart valve replacements — at ARH in Hazard in 2011.

“Together, we can accomplish more in Eastern Kentucky than either organization could ever do alone,” said Setser. “Our ultimate goal is to deliver excellent, cost-efficient care that maximizes available health care resources without competing with each other.”

“The collaboration between ARH and UK HealthCare enables us to provide areas of subspecialty care, like cardiothoracic surgery, right here in Hazard instead of having to send a patient to Lexington for treatment,” added Setser. “The transition to the UK system is nearly seamless when patients have to go to Lexington for more complex conditions or procedures.”

Another huge advantage for patients who need to have surgery in Lexington, he said, is the ability to have all follow-up care done in Hazard.

Appalachian Heart Center now part of UK Gill Heart Institute

The third part of this new collaboration is represented by the Appalachian Heart Center (AHC) based in Hazard but with clinics in Harlan, Hyden and Cumberland also. AHC cardiologists Vidya Yalamanchi, MD, Rao Podapati, MD, and Srini R. Appakondu, MD, have joined the UK Gill Heart Institute team. Eastern Kentucky patients can continue to see the same local doctors and receive the latest medical treatments without leaving the region.

Pastor Jim Sluss had surgery locally and enjoys the convenience of getting his follow-up care in Hazard also, saving him a four-hour round trip drive to Lexington that would have been required prior to UK establishing a CT surgeon in the area.
Pastor faces his own mortality

Pastor James Sluss, chaplain for Hospice of the Bluegrass Mountain Community, counsels individuals and families daily who are grappling with end-of-life anxiety and distress. But two years ago, a routine checkup revealed a life-threatening health crisis of his own. Fortunately, he could rely on a whole team of caregivers in his own community, giving him an overwhelming sense of peace in his own time of trouble.

“It was just a routine office visit for a checkup and prescription refills,” recalled Sluss. “Everything checked out fine, and I was ready to walk out the door. I almost didn’t mention it, but something caused me to stop and tell the doctor about these short, sharp pains I had recently experienced in my chest.”

His family doctor was immediately alert to symptoms Sluss had brushed off as insignificant. The doctor quickly performed an electrocardiogram (EKG) and referred him to cardiologist Vidya Yalamanchi, MD, for follow up.

Diagnosis leads to quick treatment

Yalamanchi is one of three UK HealthCare cardiologists who practice at UK Gill Heart Institute Appalachian Heart Center in Hazard. After an initial exam and further testing, Yalamanchi recommended a diagnostic heart catheterization to determine the extent of Sluss’ coronary heart disease.

“Heart catheterization revealed an 80 percent blockage in the main artery of my heart,” said Sluss, “but there were other blockages as well, so in a couple of days I went from feeling like a relatively healthy and fit 72-year-old to facing the need for open heart surgery and a triple artery bypass to restore blood flow to my heart.”

Only two days after the catheterization problem was diagnosed, UK cardiothoracic (CT) surgeon Edward Setser, MD, performed open heart surgery to relieve blockages limiting blood flow to Sluss’ heart. Doctors left the decision about whether to have his surgery in Hazard or in Lexington completely up to Sluss.

“I remember Dr. Setser coming to my room at the hospital to explain my condition and the surgical procedure he would perform to correct it,” said Sluss. “I was encouraged by his bedside manner and felt confident in the fact that he was part of the heart surgery team at UK HealthCare.”

“It is also important that Dr. Setser is a part of our community,” said Sluss. “This is the place he calls home.” Setser is now director of UK Gill Heart Institute – ARH Hazard.

“I always thought that if I needed treatment for heart disease, I would go to Lexington,” said Sluss. “It was so comforting to be able to get the care I needed right here in my own community.”

He believes the whole process would have all taken so much longer if he had to travel back and forth to Lexington for care.

Sluss credits his smooth recovery to his otherwise good health and the fact that Setser had him up and moving very soon after surgery. He was up walking day two after surgery and able to return home the first of the following week.

Sluss participated fully in the recommended cardiac rehabilitation program available through ARH in the Hazard Medical Mall. He returned to work just two months after surgery. While he continues to go to cardiac rehab two to three times a week, Sluss is able to maintain a full schedule, which often finds him up at 4 a.m. preparing for work.

Advice to others

“Today, Sluss warns others to pay attention to signals your body is giving you, get regular checkups and be completely honest with your physician.

“I think it is easy for heart disease to sneak up on you because it seems logical to attribute some of the signs to the natural course of aging,” he said.

Through it all, Sluss had great peace about the care he received from his local hospital and doctors even though he was face to face with a life-threatening condition.

“And in the end, I hope that it has better enabled me to help others facing death to find a similar peace about their circumstances.”
Dorothy Moore, Whitesburg

Leading-edge procedure repairs her heart

Unexplained falls had been robbing 77-year-old Dorothy Moore of her independence. One of those falls landed her in the hospital where Whitesburg family medicine physician Van Breeding, MD, worked to determine the cause.

A heart catheterization revealed a narrowing of the valve that controls blood flow through the heart – which can cause chest pain, fainting and heart failure. Breeding referred Moore to John C. Gurley, MD, of the UK Gill Heart Institute.

Gurley and the Gill team repaired the damaged valve using a new procedure called transcatheter aortic valve replacement (TAVR). The procedure is performed at only a few sites in the country.

During the procedure, a new valve is implanted within the diseased aortic valve using a catheter. Once in place, a balloon is inflated to open the valve. Almost immediately, the new valve starts working in place of the diseased valve, resulting in improved blood flow.

Moore now has more energy and continues her recovery by participating in aquatic therapy at Hazard ARH Medical Center. Aquatic therapy is a form of cardiac rehab combined with physical therapy for her hip.

Kelsey Day, Whitesburg

Local barber gets the fix he needed

Kelsey Day, owner of Kelsey’s Barbershop in Whitesburg, is on the mend following successful treatment for his heart problems.

A cardiologist had placed Day on medication for atrial fibrillation – a common disorder that causes a fast or irregular heartbeat – but his condition was not improving.

Day’s family physician, Van Breeding, MD, suggested he get another opinion from Jeffrey Brumfield, MD, a cardiologist with the UK Gill Heart Institute who sees patients in Hazard. Brumfield diagnosed Day as having an electrical problem with his heart. Brumfield performed a cardiac ablation, used to treat certain heart rhythm problems that cannot be controlled with medication.

Since the procedure, Day no longer has heart palpitations, light-headedness, fainting or shortness of breath.

Syed Bokhari, MD, an interventional cardiologist at Hazard ARH Medical Center, also used a stent to open a blocked heart vessel.

It was great to be able to get the help he needed close to home, said Day, because it would be too expensive to drive to Lexington and spend the night. And Day appreciates the coordination of his care between his family doctor and the Gill team of cardiologists.

Now he is back at work in his barbershop three days a week and is able care for his horses again. Day says he has not felt this good in years. He continues with medication and participates in cardiac rehab at ARH Whitesburg to keep himself on the right track.

UK Gill Heart Institute

1000 South Limestone, Lexington, Ky.

Collaboration between ARH and UK HealthCare has enabled many patients to receive their entire course of care in Hazard. Still, the benefits of collaboration extend also to those who need the advanced care available at the Gill Heart Institute’s main location in Lexington.

The UK Gill Heart Institute occupies one of six pavilions that make up UK Albert B. Chandler Hospital, the state’s premier medical center. Visitors to the Gill Heart Institute (Pavilion G) enjoy convenient parking nearby in the Hospital Parking Garage located at South Limestone and Conn Terrace.

Advanced imaging of the heart is available in the Gill Imaging Center, providing cardiac CT scans, MRIs and ultrasound images of the heart (echocardiography).

The Gill cardiology clinic has more than 30 cardiac specialists who deliver services that include prevention of heart disease, sophisticated diagnosis and treatment, and referral, as needed, to one of our dedicated specialty programs.

A floor above the clinic are four state-of-the-art suites for cardiac catheterizations and other nonsurgical therapies.

Nearby in Chandler Hospital is the state’s first hybrid operating suite equipped for treating the most complex heart and vascular conditions.

The Gill’s congestive heart failure management program works closely with the UK Transplant Center, a center at the forefront of transplant technology, using mechanical assist devices to support those with failing hearts and with more experience in heart transplant than any other center in Kentucky.

Gill specialists are regularly included on lists of the Best Doctors in America and America’s Top Doctors. In 2014, Chandler Hospital received the GoldPlus Award from the American Heart Association for reviving patients based on procedures developed by Gill doctors. The Gill’s ventricular assist device program has been accredited by The Joint Commission.

In the winter of 2014, a new 64-bed floor for the care of heart patients will open in the newest pavilion at Chandler Hospital.

Gill patients seen in Eastern Kentucky can be easily sent to Lexington if a higher level of care is needed. And many of these patients are able to return to doctors in Hazard for follow-up care.
Early in 2014, the UK Gill Heart Institute formally announced it would also be working closely with Mountain Comprehensive Healthcare to improve heart care in Eastern Kentucky.

This outreach is delivered via ARH Cardiology Associates, who in affiliation with the Gill Heart Institute, are offering cardiology services at Mountain Comp clinic in Whitesburg. ARH and UK HealthCare have set out to improve access to UK’s expertise and resources for complex cardiology care by working with community health care providers.

Mountain Comp serves the people of Letcher, Harlan, Perry, Owsley and adjacent counties.