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WHAT'S THE VALUE OF A TRAUMA CENTER? ASK A MOTHER

Real Stories and Saved Lives Underscore Need to Fund Tennessee Trauma Center Network

KINGSPORT, Tenn. — Christi Nunley's voice still quivers when she talks about the late-night phone call in summer 2004 telling her that her teenage son, Daniel Hutson, had been involved in a serious car crash on Kingsport's John B. Dennis Highway.

"A nurse called and said Daniel had been in an accident and that I needed to come to the hospital right away," Nunley said. "It's the phone call every mother dreads."

Nunley had good reason to be panicked. Daniel's Ford Ranger pickup truck had been sideswiped, causing it to flip five times in a violent rollover. Daniel, who was driving, faced life-threatening injuries, despite having worn his seatbelt. His passenger, a close friend, was killed.

Fortunately, Daniel Hutson survived thanks to swift care and attention by trauma experts at Wellmont Health System's Holston Valley Medical Center, home to one of Tennessee's six Level I trauma centers. Nunley and the rest of Daniel's family and friends, of course, couldn't be more grateful.

Now, Nunley and her son are among a growing chorus of trauma survivors and family members statewide who are lending their voices to the Tennessee Trauma Alliance, a new campaign to raise awareness of the importance of the state's trauma centers — and the need for additional resources to ensure their continued operation.

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Tennessee's trauma centers are different from emergency rooms. They care for the most critically injured patients, and must be staffed 24 hours a day with specially trained surgeons and medical staff and specialized equipment.

Combined, Tennessee's Level I trauma centers — the most comprehensive facilities — lost an estimated \$38 million in 2005 due to the costs of uncompensated health care, and the shortfall is getting bigger each year. Additionally, Level I trauma centers face a basic combined "readiness cost" of \$14 million annually to maintain the equipment and personnel necessary to provide top-notch care and services.

"The cost to keep our trauma centers open is substantial," said Dr. Julie Dunn, head of the Tennessee Trauma Alliance. "One automobile accident can require as many as six specialized surgeons. Add to that the cost of nursing and support staff, equipment and space, and it becomes a significant number."

Trauma, which can be used to describe any life-threatening bodily injury, is the leading cause of death for people ages 45 and under. Roughly 18,000 patients receive care annually in Tennessee trauma centers, which currently operate without direct public funding. Of that patient total, more than 80 percent receive care in one of Tennessee's Level I centers, like the Holston Valley Medical Center unit where Hutson was treated.

On that summer night in 2004, when an ambulance delivered Daniel to Holston Valley in critical condition following his car crash, an expert trauma team leapt into action.

"Our trauma center is set up where we're alerted beforehand if we're in need of a trauma alert," said Dr. George Testerman, a board-certified trauma surgeon who treated Daniel at HVMC. "Our physicians, our dedicated nurses, our respiratory therapists, our whole team is here to meet the needs of our sickest, most severely injured patients."

The 17-year-old had suffered multiple critical injuries, including two collapsed lungs, a torn abdomen, cracked pelvis, broken nose and torn ligaments in his knee. Another serious challenge: He showed signs of traumatic brain "shearing," or a tearing of tiny nerve cells, depriving the brain of much-needed oxygen.

"Nothing prepares you for seeing your child in that kind of condition," said Nunley, who prayed the team of doctors and nurses would be able to repair the damage to her son.

The first 24 hours were critical. Following a quick computed tomography (CT) scan, trauma staff worked feverishly to stabilize Daniel's condition and slow down internal bleeding. They transferred him to Holston Valley's Intensive Care Unit (ICU), where trauma doctors performed specialized surgery to repair the torn abdomen and stop the bleeding.

By the third day, Daniel's situation still was touch and go, but the Holston Valley trauma center staff wouldn't let up. They brought to bear every resource at their disposal, including a specially designed RotoRest bed that can be customized to cradle trauma victims and delicately rotate damaged bodies to ensure proper circulation — one of the many costly pieces of equipment often found only in trauma centers.

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“There were so many services and technologies available to him,” Nunley said. “They carted out every piece of equipment and expertise they had.”

Dr. Testerman credits the family’s involvement in Daniel’s recovery.

“We think that helped us in Daniel’s care,” he said. “The family was right here, and we interacted with them in a meaningful way. We try to be as close to the patient’s and family’s needs as we can, this seems to pay off for us. We’re real proud of Daniel.”

The result was nothing short of a miracle, said Nunley. Daniel’s condition stabilized and ultimately he was discharged to a rehabilitation facility to begin the recovery process. He began his senior year at Kingsport’s Sullivan South High School a bit late, in October 2004, and in a wheelchair. But by May 2005, he had nearly fully recovered and walked across the stage to receive his high school diploma.

Today, Daniel is 20 years old and making ‘As’ and ‘Bs’ in his second year at Northeast State Community College. As a result of his personal experience with Holston Valley’s trauma center, he is pursuing a career as a patient care technician and working part-time in the Holston Valley ICU — alongside the doctors and nurses who helped save him.

Nunley and her son take time out to share their story at churches, high schools and other places in the community. “The fact that God used these doctors and that trauma team to perform that kind of healing work is still stunning to me,” Nunley said. “Daniel is a walking miracle.”

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To learn more about Tennessee’s trauma centers, visit the Tennessee Trauma Alliance Web site, www.tntrauma.org. For interviews with Christi Nunley, contact Amy Stevens at (423) 230-8235 or Keith Miles at (615) 259-4000 or kmiles@mpf.com.