

Union General earns Chest Pain Center Accreditation for second time

By Jarrett Whitener
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

BLAIRSVILLE – Once again, the American College of Cardiology has recognized Union General Hospital for medical excellence by acknowledging the hospital with Chest Pain Center Accreditation.

To reach the goal of accreditation, the hospital underwent a rigorous, self-imposed quality improvement program, taking a year to prepare for the onsite survey that occurred in October.

“The standards are rigid, they are national, and they generally and traditionally have applied to larger institutions, and we are one of the few rural hospitals to obtain certification,” said Dr. John Kelley, a cardiologist with Piedmont Heart and medical director for the Chest Pain Center at Union General.

Continued Dr. Kelley, “Certification means that we

have a planned template for management of any person, regardless of age, that comes into the emergency room with chest pain. It’s not a hit or miss – there’s an algorithm, a template for management, and every single person gets managed that way.”

Part of that planned management is a stratification of patients into one of three categories depending on symptoms and test results, according to Dr. Kelley.

“If you have chest discomfort, after appropriate testing, very quickly done, you will be stratified into a low risk, a moderate or intermediate risk, or a high risk,” said Dr. Kelley. “If you are in the high risk, it may require transport to an appropriate institution for urgent heart catheterization, stent, or ultimately, sometimes bypass surgery.”

“If you are at moderate risk, you will be admitted to the hospital with additional testing. If you are at low risk,

you’ve been ruled out for any acute abnormalities, and you will be followed up in the office or by your primary care physician.”

Team members in the Chest Pain Center worked to get the accreditation not because they had to, but because it could only benefit these North Georgia Mountain communities.

“We chose to do this,” said Julia Barnett, Chief Nursing Officer and Chest Pain Coordinator. “It’s not something we have to do. It’s an extra thing that we chose to do because it’s the right thing to do for our patients.”

There are two big illnesses that affect this area more than others, according to Dr. Kelley: heart disease and colon cancer.

“It’s just significantly increased compared to the average population,” said Dr. Kelley. “Why? Because we have a lot of smokers and a lot of people that are overweight, a lot of people that have poor health habits and traditionally have not sought medical advice until they



L-R: Cardiologist Dr. John Kelley, Quality Director Cheryl Curtis, Chief Nursing Officer Julia Barnett, and Hospital CEO Lewis Kelley. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

got critical.” Of course, having a population that’s prone to heart disease is just one of the many reasons why it is so important that the hospital chose to pursue Chest Pain Center Accreditation, which it has been awarded now for the second time in a row.

“I think heart health is very important, and just like Dr. Kelley said, it’s one of the major causes of death,” said Hospital CEO Lewis Kelley. “Of course, I think the more you focus on something, the better you get at it, so we are just really happy with what we have, and I think

all employees are motivated to make stuff like this happen.”

For more information on the symptoms and early signs of heart-related problems, the hospital recommends the early heart attack care website DeputyHeartAttack.org.

Earthquake...from Page 1A

quake – were strong enough to noticeably shift the ground in Georgia.

Earthquakes are measured using the Richter magnitude scale, which was developed in 1935 by Charles F. Richter of the California Institute of Technology as a mathematical device to compare earthquake sizes, according to Earthquake.USGS.gov.

“On the Richter Scale, magnitude is expressed in whole numbers and decimal fractions,” according to the website. “For example, a magnitude 5.3 might be computed for a moderate earthquake, and a strong earthquake might be rated as magnitude 6.3.”

“Because of the logarithmic basis of the scale, each whole number increase

in magnitude represents a tenfold increase in measured amplitude; as an estimate of energy, each whole number step in the magnitude scale corresponds to the release of about 31 times more energy than the amount associated with the preceding whole number value.”

Bomb Threat...from Page 1A

the Georgia Emergency Management Agency throughout the ordeal, and GEMA informed local authorities that Towns was just one of many locations to receive a bomb threat that day.

All told, the Rec Department had to cancel 15 practices for local rec league basketball teams, interrupting the afterschool activities of 98 Towns County children ranging in age between 7 and 12 years old.

“It’s a terrible thing that somebody would do that,” said Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw. “It’s just absolutely terrible, and I hope they find the people that are responsible for it.”

“I’m very proud of the way the sheriff’s and fire departments handled it. They did a good job with it.”

As noted above, the FBI and GBI are both looking into the threat, which has been linked to a series of other bomb threats made all across the country and in Canada that Thursday.

“We are aware of the recent bomb threats made in cities around the country, and we remain in touch with our law enforcement partners to provide assistance,” said the FBI. “As always, we encourage the public to remain vigilant and to promptly report suspicious activities which could represent a threat to public safety.”

The threat reached far and wide on Dec. 13, hitting dozens of cities, businesses, organizations and academic institutions from Washington

D.C. to San Francisco and everywhere in between.

At this time, authorities believe the threats to have been delivered via a robo-email, and the text of one of these emails was shared online by the Cedar Rapids Police Department in Iowa.

A request for the text of the bomb threat email received in Towns County had not been answered by the GBI at press time.

However, the following is the text of the bomb threat email received and shared by the Cedar Rapids Police Department the same day as the threat made in Towns County, with errors in spelling and grammar included:

“Subject: Do not waste your time

“Hello. My man hid an explosive device (Hexogen) in the building where your business is conducted. My mercenary assembled the explosive device according to my guide. It has small dimensions and it is covered up very carefully, it is impossible to damage the building structure by my bomb, but in the case of its detonation there will be many victims.”

“My recruited person keeps the area under the control. If any unusual behavior cop is noticed he will power the bomb.”

“I can call off my man if you make a transfer. 20,000 dollars is the cost for your life and business. Pay it to me in BTC and I warrant that I will withdraw my man and the device won’t detonate. But do not try to cheat- my guarantee

will become valid only after 3 confirmations in blockchain network.

“My payment details (Bitcoin address): (REMOVED)

“You must solve problems with the transaction by the end of the workday, if you are late with the money the device will detonate.”

“Nothing personal this is just a business, if you don’t transfer me the bitcoins and a bomb explodes, next time other companies will send me more money, because this is not a one-time action.”

“For my safety, I will no longer log into this email. I check my address every forty min and if I receive the payment I will order my person to get away.”

“If the explosive device detonates and the authorities see this letter:

“We are not terrorists and don’t assume any liability for explosions in other places.”

The perpetrator(s) of the bomb threat scam likely requested payment in Bitcoin, a popular cryptocurrency, because it is a decentralized currency that can be hard to trace.

And while it remains unclear at this time just how successful the bomb threat was in extorting money from businesses and institutions around the country, one thing is certain: whoever they may be, the scammers succeeded in causing a good bit of chaos on Dec. 13.

Shadow puppets bring ‘The Grinch’ to life in Hiawassee

By Jarrett Whitener
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The Mountain Regional Puppet Company hosted a unique shadow puppet show on Thursday, Dec. 13, at the Towns County Public Library.

Thursday’s performance told the story of Dr. Seuss’ very own “How the Grinch Stole Christmas,” alongside some Christmas songs performed by other traditional puppets.

“Our shows are, although we title them one thing, a variety of things,” said Vince Stone, director of the Mountain Regional Library System. “What’s different about tonight is that we are doing what is called shadow puppets ... and the kids have never seen anything like that before. It has never been done in this area.”

Shadow puppetry started in Southeast Asia hundreds of years ago and acted as an ancient form of storytelling, according to Stone.

“Shadow puppets are done by projecting a light behind the puppet,” said Stone. “We have one here that is from overseas and it is flat, and you move them with sticks up against the background, so that when it’s projected right here, they can see.”

In Towns County that Thursday, local children gathered on the rug in front of the stage in the children’s area of the library and did not let their eyes wander even for a second, as the famous Christmas tale unfolded in shadows before them.

Not only did the shadow puppet performance get the attention of the children, but the musical numbers with the



Children watching a shadow puppet performance of “How the Grinch Stole Christmas,” inside the Towns County Public Library on Thursday, Dec. 13. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

traditional puppets brought an energy to the audience, with some kids dancing around and others pointing and laughing at the puppets.

The show in Hiawassee was a rousing success, and puppeteers were optimistic due to their turnout and experience at other shows.

“This is our 29th show since we have started the group, and we have performed in front of almost 1,300 people,” said Stone. “So, we have a little bit of a reputation because people have seen the quality of shows we do.”

“When they know we are coming, they know that it is going to be something unique, because we try not to repeat any of the stories that we do.”

The group used the puppets from overseas to do the evening’s introduction, while the shadow puppets, crafted by Maria Thomas of the Towns County Public

Library, were used for the main performance.

Following the shadow puppet show, the library did a random drawing for children to have a chance to win some free Christmas themed books.

The Mountain Regional Puppet Company puts on many shows like this one every year, each with its own unique themes. It also hosts other activities during the year for parents and children alike to enjoy.

And those who missed the shadow puppet show in Hiawassee still have an opportunity to see the final performance on Dec. 19 at 5 p.m. inside the Mountain Regional Library in Young Harris.

For more information on the library and upcoming events, visit MountainRegionalLibrary.org.

Nichols...from Page 1A

wife bought the building that had previously housed the B & T Market and started Hiawassee Electric. The building is still there on Bell Creek Road, just past Fred’s Store on the same side of the street.

“We stayed in business for over, well, probably 32 or more years,” said Nichols. “We had an appliance store there in that building, and we had an electrical and plumbing shop.”

“When we retired and quit the business, we remodeled the building and made it into a music hall. It would seat about 325 people. It wouldn’t be exaggerating to say that we averaged over 200 people every Saturday night. And holiday weekends, they’d be standing up around the walls.”

“We played there for over 10 years. And then, of course, I’ve played at the Fair, and we sang all over the area over the

years. “We played from April through October every Saturday night for more than 10 years at that building. We’re not doing that much anymore because we just don’t want to get tied up every Saturday night like we were for years.”

“Then, they had an old building up here across from the school called the Log Cabin. And we played up there for probably 10 or 12 years – pretty much the same group. And that’s unusual that a group stays together that long.”

“We went out to Verizon studios in Asheville and made some CDs, and they did pretty well. We’ve enjoyed a good run. We are doing mostly Gospel now. We get calls from churches to do Homecomings and special events.”

Nichols said they have played at churches all over the

region – Marion and Franklin, North Carolina; Gainesville, Atlanta, Blue Ridge, Ellijay and Clayton in Georgia, to name a few.

“My wife keeps a book,” he said. “She takes a picture of the church and the church sign where we sing, and it’s now about 7 or 8 inches thick.”

“I’ve always enjoyed music. Never had a lesson in my life. The Lord gave me a little talent, I guess.”

Nichols said country, blue grass and gospel quartets are the kinds of music he’s always liked best.

“I think one of the greatest songs that’s ever been written and one of my favorites is ‘How Great Thou Art,’” said Nichols.

And the Ralph Nichols Band rendition of “Christmas Time’s A’Coming” was nothing to sneeze at that Monday evening.

Heaton...from Page 1A

J. Clay Fuller of the Northern District of Georgia had previously certified the case as ready for trial on Aug. 28, according to court documents.

All three men pleaded not guilty to the federal charges earlier this year on April 9, after a federal grand jury handed up a 212-count indictment listing the Gowder brothers and Dr. Heaton as defendants

on April 4.

Each defendant is presumed innocent of the charges, according to the U.S. District Attorney’s Office in Atlanta, “and it will be the government’s burden to prove each defendant’s guilt beyond a reasonable doubt at trial.”

As previously reported, prior to their Feb. 4, 2016, arrests in Union County, Mike

Gowder was the CEO of Union General Hospital and Dr. Heaton ran a family practice clinic in Blairsville.

Dr. David Gowder was the emergency room director at Union General Hospital at the time of his initial arrest for allegedly attempting to fill fraudulent prescriptions



Members of the Mountain Regional Puppet Company – library staff – showing off some of the puppets they used in their Dec. 13 performances. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

Sheriff’s Office search warrant yields arrests and seizure

News Special
Towns County Herald

On Tuesday, Dec. 11, Towns County Sheriff’s Office Investigators and Deputies executed a search warrant at a residence located on Hill Crest Spur in Hiawassee.

During the course of executing the search warrant, investigators seized a quantity of marijuana with a street value of \$2,500.

Also seized were a quantity of other prescription pills, cash and drug-related objects.

As a result of the search warrant and investigation, the two suspects were arrested on a variety of charges.

William Irwin Fitzgibbons, 67, of Hiawassee, has been charged with the sale of Schedule II drug Dilaudid; possession of Schedule I drug LSD; felony possession of marijuana; possession



Bonnie Fitzgibbons



William Fitzgibbons

of marijuana with intent to distribute; possession of Schedule I drug THC; and possession of drug-related objects.

Bonnie Joy Fitzgibbons, 65, of Hiawassee, has been charged with two counts sale of Schedule II drug Dilaudid; possession of Schedule I drug LSD; felony possession of marijuana; possession

of marijuana with intent to distribute; possession of Schedule I drug THC; and possession of drug-related objects.

The investigation is active and ongoing, and the case will be referred to the Enotah Judicial Circuit District Attorney’s Office for prosecution, according to the Sheriff’s Office.