

# Caring for Kids

## Avera Children's offers top-quality, comprehensive pediatric services

BY DONNA FARRIS, AVERA MCKENNAN WRITER/EDITOR

Within a whimsical environment of bright colors, toys and games are medical professionals who are utterly serious about the job they do.

Advanced critical care. Neonatology. Specialized surgery. Trauma. When pediatric needs go beyond the common ear infection or respiratory virus, parents need to know they are placing their children into hands of pediatric experts who follow evidence-based protocols and achieve high outcomes, day after day, month after month, year after year.

This is the work that takes place at Avera Children's Hospital & Clinics within Avera McKennan Hospital & University Health Center, and the reason why families in our region need look no further for the best in pediatric services – delivered with the care and compassion Avera is known for.

“We are a hospital within a hospital, with all the capabilities of a free-standing children's hospital,” said Dr. Michael Elliott, Avera Children's pediatrician.



This “hospital within a hospital” is comprised of 114 beds devoted to the care of infants, children and adolescents in Avera Children's Level III Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU), newborn nursery, Pediatric Unit, and Pediatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU), as well as the child and adolescent units at the Avera Behavioral Health

Center. A skilled team of 30+ physicians in nearly 20 distinct pediatric specialties and subspecialties have expertise to care for virtually any child.

Because Avera also offers the only inpatient behavioral health services in the region, Avera Children's pediatric care is truly comprehensive. Children are more likely to need treatment or hospitalization for behavioral health disorders such as depression, ADHD, anxiety or conduct disorders, than any other reason.

Avera Children's is one of only 218 hospitals to be a member of NACHRI, the National Association of Children's Hospitals and Related Institutions. “We have quality control monitoring, quality improvement projects, and a database in which to compare our outcomes and our work here to other children's hospitals across the country,” Dr. Elliott said.

### Parents appreciate Avera's nurturing, family-centered care

Before his second birthday, little Keeran had already faced four surgeries, and suffered through pain that he didn't understand. When it came time for his fifth to repair a cleft palate, what really mattered to Bryan and Natalee Van Gelder was for him to experience as little trauma as possible.

After checking out pediatric care around the area and wider region, the Van Gelders chose Avera Children's. Selecting a hospital was not a decision they took lightly, because they wanted to make certain their son's pain would be carefully managed.

“We had a wonderful meeting with the nurse anesthetist and anesthesiologist at Avera before the surgery, and had all our questions answered,” Natalee said.

Little things meant a lot – like staff waiting until their son was calm before putting on a bracelet, and performing lab work right in the OR. As parents, Bryan and Natalee could accompany their son into the surgical suite. “It was actually much better for me to see that he was OK than to not know if he was upset, scared or in pain,” Natalee said.

After surgery, Keeran's pain seemed to be well managed. “The nurses were amazing. They were quiet, sweet and nurturing.” The Van Gelders appreciated Avera's focus on family-centered care. “They allowed my husband and me to assist in Keeran's care when we could – knowing it would not compromise his care – so that he would better handle it,” Natalee said.

The Van Gelders felt at home in the Avera Children's Pediatrics Unit. Keeran was entertained just enough to stay distracted from discomfort, but not bothered when he was resting and doing well. “Just the mood on the peds floor was so comforting,” Natalee said.

The Van Gelders say they would return to Avera Children's for their son's next phase of surgeries. “We were very anxious and protective of little Keeran, but our care was the best we could have imagined.” Natalee said.

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– DR. MICHAEL ELLIOTT, AVERA PEDIATRICIAN

Avera Children's treats thousands of children and families each year. "All of our data says we're doing an outstanding job," said Lori Popkes, assistant vice president for Women and Children's Services at Avera McKennan. For example:

- Avera Children's PICU scores in the top 5 percent for low morbidity/mortality in the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit Evaluation System (PICUEs), a national benchmarking system measuring quality of care and medical outcomes.
- Avera Children's has achieved a "zero" rate of ventilator-acquired pneumonias and central line infections since 2006.
- Avera's quality Pediatric Sedation Service achieves outcomes at and above the national benchmark among children's hospitals.



- The Avera Children's NICU consistently scores in the 75th percentile and higher on national benchmarks which ensure quality care through the Vermont Oxford Network. This network compares outcomes on 60 variables to more than 400 other NICUs in the nation.
- The NICU exceeds national database statistics in indicators such as oxygen requirements, pointing to better outcomes for critically ill newborns.

### Level III neonatology

The continuum of children's care begins at the neonate level, with

27 beds licensed in the NICU. This unit is certified as Level IIIB NICU by the American Academy of Pediatrics, meaning it can care for newborn infants with extreme prematurity, extremely low birth weight or severe, complex illness.

Four neonatologists as well as specialists provide around-the-clock coverage. A staff of 110 includes nurses certified in neonatal intensive care and neonatal nurse practitioners.

The unit is equipped with the latest in technology, including Giraffe® OmniBeds, which provide an optimal environment for a baby's healing and development, as well as high-frequency ventilation and nitric oxide therapy to enhance lung function of premature infants.

Avera Children's is home to the state's only March of Dimes NICU Family Support Program, which responds to the emotional and informational needs of parents.

Avera's emphasis on breastfeeding benefits its tiniest patients. Neonatologists "prescribe" breastfeeding just like they would medicine, said Lynn Josten, board certified lactation consultant with the Avera Breastfeeding Center.

"It's that important to newborn babies." Lactation consultants are available to help any new mother at Avera McKennan achieve breastfeeding success. In Avera McKennan's NICU, breastfeeding rates are triple the national average.

### Babies through teens

If children need to be hospitalized during their infancy, childhood or teenage years, they are cared for either in the pediatrics unit or PICU, depending on the severity of their condition.

Staff are skilled in caring for the gamut of medical and surgical diagnoses, including neurology, burn care, respiratory illness, trauma and orthopedics. Inpatient and outpatient pediatric and PICU units have seen growth exceeding 11 percent over the past three years.

Unique to Avera Children's in the region is inpatient psychological care for children and adolescents with disorders such as depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, anxiety, eating disorders or addiction. As the only inpatient facility in the area, the Avera Behavioral Health Center has specially-designed wings for children and adolescents with a total of 40 beds as well as outpatient care.

## A grown-up friend for little patients



Because it's so new and different from their lives at home, hospitalization is often a scary prospect for children.

The friendship of a caring adult can make all the difference.

"The hospital is such a big grown-up place," said Twila Perkinson, Child Life Specialist at Avera Children's Hospital.

Child Life Specialists help care for the body, mind and spirit

of children by meeting them at their level, in ways such as taking kids on pre-admission tours or providing pleasant distractions during procedures or tests.

Children process information from the world around them much differently than adults, and so have distinct needs for managing stress. With carefully designed "play" or just being a friend, a Child Life Specialist's caring touch greatly reduces the stress and anxiety of children.

Because it's common to hear big "hospital" words in adult conversations at the hospital, Perkinson is careful to talk to children in language they will understand. Instead of anesthesia, she talks about the "special medicine" the child will breathe in to go to sleep. Instead of the operating table, she talks about the special bed... "because children know a table is where you eat."

As part of a multidisciplinary team at Avera Children's Hospital, the Child Life Specialist serves as a link between families and medical staff, as well as an advocate for children, families and family-centered care.

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## A family-centered approach

Everything involving patient care at Avera McKennan is centered around the family. Patients and families are seen as valuable partners in their care and are involved at every step of the way. “We understand that parents know their children best, and we see them as a crucial resource for help and information,” Popkes said.

When a child is hospitalized, families are welcomed with provisions such as comfortable pull-out couches, meals and snacks, even laundry facilities.

While a child has surgery, parents are given pagers so they know immediately when their child is taken to recovery. Parents are allowed to accompany their child to the surgical suite, and stay throughout the procedure if they so choose.

Parents and siblings are welcome as visitors 24 hours a day – even in the NICU. “We’ve long recognized that having the family present while child is in the hospital is very important,” said Dr. Elliott. “When we look at the child and family in total, it allows us to give more comprehensive care.”

## Experience and dedication

An experienced, dedicated staff sets Avera Children’s care apart, Popkes said.

With over 20 pediatric subspecialists, the major specialties are in place at Avera Children’s. “We are able to give very high quality care to kids with complicated problems,” Dr. Elliott said.

If a situation arises in which ultra-specialty care is needed, Avera pediatric sub-specialists have formed good working relationships with centers in Omaha, Minneapolis and Denver, Dr. Elliott added.

A special dedication to care for children makes the difference among Avera family practitioners, pediatricians, and pediatric specialists and sub-specialists, Popkes said. “It’s their passion.”

“Everyone – from nurses, to pharmacists, to the housekeepers – who works in this area wants to be a part of caring for children,” said Evie Orcutt, children’s services manager. “We feel like it’s a calling.”

While pediatric care at Avera is well-developed, Dr. Elliott expects services to continue to improve and expand. “Medicine is always changing. There are new technologies all the time. It’s our goal to never be satisfied with where we are. We want to compare ourselves with the best.”

## Team efforts add up to extraordinary care

Rather than one distinct specialty, what makes the difference between extraordinary and ordinary pediatric care is a team approach in an array of specialty areas.

When it comes to the care of their children, outcomes are of top importance to parents, said Avera McKennan pediatric surgeon Dr. Stephen Karl. Avera Children’s Hospital & Clinics offers specialty care with high outcomes – right here in Sioux Falls.

One example is a surgical procedure for a condition known as gastroschisis, when a baby is born with his intestines on the outside of his abdomen. “We’re taking a relatively novel approach,” Dr. Karl said.

Babies with this condition are identified before birth through routine ultrasound exams. Immediately after a planned C-section, as close to full-term as possible, the pediatric surgeon repairs the abnormality. “We’ve had an extraordinary experience here, with outcomes that appear to be as good or better than any in the published literature,” Dr. Karl said.

“We couldn’t do it without good perinatology, we couldn’t do it without good neonatology, we couldn’t do it without good nursing and respiratory therapy, and so on. Medicine is a team event.”

Dr. Karl operates on children ranging in age from neonates to teenagers, doing all types of procedures, such as repairing congenital abnormalities or removing growths and tumors. Because it’s abnormal for children to need surgery, his caseload is a collection of unusual conditions.

“There’s watch-making, and

there’s clock-making,” Dr. Karl said, comparing pediatric to adult surgery. “And the watch needs to work for 90 or 100 years, versus a few decades or less,” Dr. Karl said. Pediatric surgery must also be done in order to allow for and foster healthy growth and development.

An important aspect of pediatric surgery is pediatric anesthesia, offered at Avera Children’s by Dr. Brian DeVries and Dr. Ryan Schellpfeffer, anesthesiologists with additional training in pediatric anesthesiology. Having such expertise on the team places Avera Children’s at the same level of other specialized children’s hospitals in the region.

“Every case is treated differently,” said Dr. DeVries. Children are anatomically different from adults, from the size of their airway, to their body weight. Because of fear or apprehension, children must be approached differently.

Just as the science of pediatric surgery is different, the philosophy and pace of care for children is different. “You have to go at their speed,” Dr. Karl said. Parents have more questions and hesitations about surgery for their children than they would have about themselves. “You spend hours with families.”

However, the physical process of healing and recovery is surprisingly similar between adults and children. “Wound healing has its own clock, and it’s basically the same regardless of age,” Dr. Karl said.

Yet children seem to go through it more quickly, he said. “Children want to be well. They don’t dwell on their difficulties. They dwell on their opportunities.”

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## Truly comprehensive pediatric care includes behavioral health

Because Avera cares for the whole child – body, mind and spirit – behavioral health is part of the comprehensive pediatric care offered by Avera Children's.

With 40 beds in specialized child and adolescent units at the state-of-the-art Avera Behavioral Health Center, Avera offers the only private inpatient behavioral health care in Sioux Falls and wider region. Pediatric discharges at the Avera Behavioral Health Center exceed 1,150 per year.

Today's society and family dynamics place increasing pressure on children and adolescents. "All these stresses can affect kids very deeply. Sometimes, they're just not equipped to handle everything that's coming at them," said Colleen Weber, manager of the child and adolescent programs at Avera Behavioral Health Center.

"We're a place for kids who are experiencing a mental health crisis. Hospitalization is reserved for children and adolescents facing critical issues, such as suicidal thoughts, decreasing function at home or school, unmanageable behavior or a combination of several concerns," Weber said. The number one diagnosis for inpatients on both child and adolescent units is depression.

Most children served are between the ages of 4 and 18 and are struggling with issues such as depression, suicidal thoughts, ADHD or conduct disorders. Average length of stay is just over seven days.

"The children who come to us generally need intensive care and observation. In a short amount of time, we have to do an excellent job of observing, assessing and working together as a team in order to help children while they're here, and put forth an effective after-care treatment plan," Weber said. Members of that team include psychiatrists, psychologists, educators, social workers, nurses, behavioral health technicians, chaplains, pharmacists, dietitians and more.

This team cooperates in making the most of a structured day that includes some or all of the following: Academics; group, family and individual therapy; fitness; self-esteem

therapy; cognitive behavioral therapy; stress management; coping skills; chemical dependency therapy and more.

Alternative therapies such as art, music and drama encourage relaxation and decrease anxiety. For example, expressive therapist Michael Jerke developed the idea of creating a stage area where children and adolescents could perform, role play or act out their feelings. Patients have access to a karaoke machine, puppets, costumes and props.

"We have seen children go from angry to quiet and participating in a matter of minutes with the use of music and puppets on the children's stage," said Jan Questad, RN/clinical nurse educator. "It's absolutely heart-warming to witness."

### Behavioral health leader

Avera McKennan developed its behavioral health program 50 years ago. The specialized adolescent unit was added in 1987, and a children's program in 2003.

Avera combines best-known practices with real-life experience of its staff to offer a truly unique program. "We don't just do a one-size fits all program. We're always finding innovative ways to meet the needs of kids and families," Weber said.

As a regional behavioral health leader, the Avera Behavioral Health Center hosts regular "Friday Forums" to share expertise on topics such as autism, ADHD or conduct disorders with educators and other school personnel.

The child and adolescent programs routinely exceed the 90th percentile on the 100-point Press Ganey patient satisfaction survey. Parents play an integral role and are contacted daily regarding their child's progress.

"It's not unusual for us to receive a letter from a parent, saying 'We thank God there was someone we could turn to when we had this need,' " Weber said. "We don't profess to always cure, but we certainly can help. We're here when families need us."

## Critical care team handles the most serious of cases

Children's hospitals that support an array of pediatric specialties must be equipped and staffed to handle the critically ill children who will be cared for within those specialties.

Critical care is a specialty in itself at Avera Children's through a group of specialists practicing with Pediatric Critical Care and Hospitalist Services.

"We're a supporting cast for children's services at Avera Children's," said Dr. Frank Gioia, board certified in the specialties of pediatrics and pediatric critical care.

The group provides medical staffing for Avera Children's Hospital Pediatric Intensive Care Unit, as well as hospitalist services for children referred to Avera Children's. The physicians working pediatric critical care at Avera Children's have combined experience of over 70 years.

Pediatric intensive care fills the continuum of care for critically ill children, from infancy to young adulthood. On either side of that continuum are the neonatal ICU and adult ICU.

Whereas many specialists concentrate on an organ or body system, such as the heart or lungs, pediatric intensivists specialize on the whole patient in critical illness.

Examples of critical care patients include

- The child who suffers a head injury in a car accident, and needs ventilator support until his body is again able to take on the task of breathing
- The child with asthma whose condition worsens due to a virus
- The child with muscular dystrophy who develops pneumonia
- The infant who requires surgery to correct a birth defect

Critical care specialists work closely with other pediatric sub-specialists, as well as the trauma team, emergency services team and referring physicians, said Dr. Eugene Finch, a member of the Pediatric Critical Care and Hospitalist group at Avera Children's.

This team also serves as general pediatricians for patients from out of town who are hospitalized, away from their primary care provider. Because these doctors are "hospitalists," they see patients in the hospital only, not on an outpatient basis. Once such children are released from the hospital, they go back to their hometown primary care physician, Dr. Finch said. "Continuity of care is paramount."

Having a pediatric intensive care team at Avera Children's means more children, even those who are seriously ill, can be cared for in or near their home community. "With the array of specialties offered at Avera, our group is a very vital part of the team to support children with special or acute needs," Dr. Gioia said.

Another benefit is more favorable outcomes for seriously ill children. "Programs with pediatric intensivists have a measurable and significant difference in outcomes," Dr. Gioia said. "We measure up very well compared with national benchmarks. The reason for that is a very experienced team."



## A home away from home for families

The Avera McKennan campus is home to an eight-bed Ronald McDonald House, as part of the Walsh Family Village. The house is a place of refuge for patients of the Avera Children's Hospital and their families. "More than a place to stay for families of seriously ill children, the Ronald McDonald House is a place of emotional support for moms, dads, brothers and sisters when they need it most," said Fred Slunecka, regional president at Avera McKennan.

"PROGRAMS WITH PEDIATRIC INTENSIVISTS HAVE A MEASURABLE AND SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE IN OUTCOMES." - DR. FRANK GIOIA, PEDIATRIC CRITICAL CARE SPECIALIST