

In just three hours Monday, a bustling downtown hospital became a quiet and hollow place. The old **Alaska Native Medical Center** shut down and the new one opened, accepting patients promptly at 6 a.m.

Moving the patients, some very frail, took a year of planning and was the most delicate part of the massive move from the old Native hospital to the new \$168 million facility on Tudor Road. By 9 a.m., it was over, with 63 patients whisked across town by ambulance and specialty van.

Along the way, a pregnant woman felt beginning labor contractions, a little girl with asthma breathed with the aid of an oxygen mask, and a stroke victim sat calmly, wondering whether the new hospital would live up to its reputation. Nurses had to manually pump oxygen bags for three intensive care patients as they were transported.

No problems were reported in the patient transfers, though the new hospital itself had minor first-day bugs.

Since opening as a tuberculosis sanitarium in 1953 and turning into a general medical hospital about a decade later, the old building served as a medical focal point for Natives statewide and a community gathering place for those living in Anchorage or visiting here. The lobby typically was crammed.

Dr. Richard Mandsager, the hospital director, watched many leave the old building from his post at the front door. He said the effort was in the hands of hundreds of hospital workers and other U.S. Indian Health Service employees. Military personnel in camouflage fatigues directed traffic. No one at the hospital had the day off, and everyone from orderlies to physicians -- Mandsager included -- wheeled patients.

Eleven ambulances and five special vans were used to move 61 inpatients and two emergency walk-ins. Another 33 outpatients and family members staying at the hospital quarters were moved, most in a chartered People Mover bus.

Mercedes Blanco, an 8-year-old with asthma and pneumonia, volunteered to be the first to go. She was officially admitted as the No. 1 patient, though an intensive care patient suffering from a spinal cord injury technically arrived first.

For the move, she was one of the more fragile patients, hooked to a portable oxygen tank and transported in an ambulance with her mother and a nurse. But she's not frail. An orange belt in karate, Mercedes is just finishing up second grade at College Gate Elementary.

By 6:30 a.m. Monday, she was resting in the new hospital, which she described as "OK." She particularly liked the whimsical hallway artwork of a walrus and other sea creatures, said her mother, Rhonda. The mother liked the rollaway cot tucked into a cabinet, an improvement over the thin mat she slept on in the old place.

When Mercedes got hungry, she could order from the 24-hour room service, a perk of the new place that is free to patients, with items from pilot bread to ice cream to turkey, roast beef and peanut butter sandwiches.

The telephone in her room wasn't hooked up yet, but the remote control to the television worked -- not the case in all patient rooms at that point. By day's end, all the phones and televisions should have been in working order, Mandsager said.

Moving day pains came in the form of a momentary snag in the telephone system, an overflow of employee parking, and the realization that some patient rooms are too small for a wheelchair to roll past a bed.

The parking crisis, with dozens of cars lining the street, will last until more spots are created.

None of that was bothering Gust Bartman, 73, a retired commercial fisherman from Dillingham. For the past year, he and his wife, Natalia, have lived in Wasilla, but find it hard to live a subsistence lifestyle there. They were preparing to return to Dillingham last month when he suffered a stroke and he was admitted to the old hospital, released, then brought back again.

He had read about the hospital architects traveling extensively in the Bush to talk to Natives about the new building's design. He sees the new hospital as joining many different indigenous cultures.

"This brings them a little more together with the spiritual," Bartman said.

As the van carrying Bartman pulled away from the old hospital, a security guard stood by the "ANMC closed" sign. The last boxes will be carted out in the next couple of days, maybe sooner, said Steve Wiener, who is directing the movers. The hospital complex will be fenced, boarded up and guarded until it is disposed of. Already the boilers have been cut off.

A beaming staff greeted Bartman at the new hospital, shaking his hand and escorting him to his room. After a few minutes, someone brought in his crossword puzzle book, which he had left at the old place.

At 9:10 a.m., Mandsager came on the loudspeaker: "The old hospital is closed," he said. All the patients had been moved. "... Everybody can go back to their regular job."

Only one patient remained. Matt Dillon DeBilt, a premature baby just 16 days old, was sleeping, recovering from his circumcision that morning, his father at his side.

A little later, with the old building nearly empty, Tim DeBilt, a school teacher in Quinhagak, picked up his tiny son and carried him out of the hospital.

The last patient went home.

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