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A health innovation hub grows in Lake Nona Medical City

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The three Lake Nona, Florida Medical City hospitals

The hospitals within Lake Nona Medical City are out to prove that collaborative, innovation hubs can be built from the ground up—literally.

The medical city sits on 650 acres in the Lake Nona development in Orlando, Florida, and includes University of Central Florida's Lake Nona Hospital, which is jointly run by UCF and HCA Healthcare; Orlando's Veterans Affairs Medical Center; a Nemours Children's Hospital; GuideWell Innovation Center; University of Florida Health's Research & Academic Center; a training center for Johnson & Johnson and more.

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The 17-square-mile mixed-use development adjacent to Orlando International Airport is owned by Tavistock Development Company, a real estate arm of investment company Tavistock. Along with the healthcare organizations, the community includes employers Verizon, KPMG and the U.S. Tennis Association. It also is where most of the people who work at these companies live.

“When we started this project, there were a lot of cow pastures,” said Dr. Michael Schlosser, senior vice president of innovation at Nashville-based HCA Healthcare. “It’s been built from the ground up, not just the innovation hub, but the hospital itself.”

The community’s development took off during the mid-2000s and early 2010s amid Florida’s population boom. The first impetus to create a medical component occurred in 2005 when the University of Central Florida needed a location for its medical school, said Gloria Caulfield, vice president of strategic alliances at Tavistock Development Company. After getting the medical school, the Tavistock team wanted to create a medical city.

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“We had the land, there was a desire to do something exceptional here,” Caulfield said.

The medical school received 50 acres of land and \$12.5 million from Tavistock to build the medical school. It received an additional \$25 million from the State of Florida, which approved the project. After opening several facilities within its health sciences campus after 2010, the university selected HCA to build a \$175 million hospital in 2016. It opened in March 2021.



UCF Medical School

University of Central Florida Medical School in Lake Nona

The medical city also includes a Nemours Children's Hospital that opened in 2012 and a \$665 million Veterans Affairs Department medical center that opened in 2015.

HCA's Schlosser said the innovative nature of the community goes beyond healthcare.

“The whole city is wired differently, like the broadband capabilities are different,” he said. “They laid it out in such a way that it’s conducive to the autonomous [shuttle] vehicles that drive around.”

HCA, VA, Nemours working together

HCA and the other healthcare organizations in Lake Nona work separately and together on digital health-focused simulation labs, intensive care unit capacity and more. HCA named the UCF Lake Nona Hospital one of its two innovation hub hospitals that test technology such as smart eyewear.

Clinicians across the three hospitals frequently work in each other's facilities and share best practices, said Martha McGill, Nemours Children's Health Central Florida regional president.

"We are all in touch and aware of the innovations that we've each been able to bring to Tavistock and the medical city, so we are learning from the best and the brightest," McGill said. "Healthcare is hard enough as it is, so I think the presence of each other has given us the biggest lift."



Nemours Children's Health

Nemours Children's Health at Lake Nona, Florida

The collaborative environment has allowed the VA to experiment on several initiatives, including a medical virtual reality simulation lab project with Nemours, said Dr. Graig Blevins, VA Orlando's chief of the emergency department. This week, Nemours and the Orlando VA shared best practices on pediatric trauma with clinicians at both facilities.

Working with the UCF Lake Nona Hospital and Nemours helps the VA understand patient populations that it doesn't interact with frequently, Blevins said.

But creating innovative medical communities doesn't come without

challenges, among them the need to recruit many employees and to put competition aside.

“There’s a process and people component to it where they really have to work well together,” said Erik Pupo, director of health IT advisory at consultant Guidehouse. “You don’t always see that in U.S. healthcare. There are a lot of locations where you look and you say ‘It’s a great location in terms of the types of hospitals,’ and then you look at how they work together and it’s not so good.”

Recruiting tech workers to any location is potentially harder after COVID-19 made many jobs virtual, said Monica Hon, vice president at consultancy Advis. “We’ve turned a corner on working virtually and that’s fortunate because we can enjoy the benefits of people working from wherever...but I also see it as a staffing challenge,” she said.

What’s next for Lake Nona Medical City?

Schlosser said one of the most appealing parts of the Lake Nona location was the potential to expand its physical presence.

“If we went to the middle of a big city like Miami, we wouldn’t have an opportunity to do that. Our campuses there are space-constrained,” Schlosser said. “This gives us a lot of green pasture where we can really build it the way we want to.”

HCA isn’t the only organization thinking about growth. For Tavistock, there are plans to scale the medical city beyond the hospitals and companies that have built a presence there.

Caulfield said Tavistock is looking to attract startups to potentially work with the hospitals and research institutions. The company operates a health tech and sports innovation accelerator in Lake Nona, she said.

"We are recruiting some of the best companies that we can find out there in the country and the world, and we surround them with support and the resources that they need to thrive," Caulfield said.

Tavistock also runs the Lake Nona Impact Forum, a three-day event designed to bring together the brightest minds in health innovation. At this year's event, AI-enabled preventative health company Fountain Life said it was opening a precision diagnostic center in Lake Nona.

"We want to create an identity here around medical innovation and the future of healthcare," Caulfield said. "Some of that comes from organic growth and some of it comes through recruiting in organizations that just want to do things that are new and different."

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