

The Sonoma Index-Tribune

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Sonoma Valley Hospital adding two orthopedic surgeons *One here, one coming next month*

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Sonoma Valley Hospital officials are looking to recapture a greater share of the orthopedic surgical market by bringing in two new surgeons.

Dr. Brian Freeto, a member of Napa Valley Orthopedics, opened a Sonoma office last month, sharing space with cardiologist Dr. James Price at 558 Third St. W. The sports medicine and arthroscopy specialist is busy building his patient base. In May, Dr. Mike Brown will open his Sonoma practice. The joint replacement specialist will work several days a week in Sonoma, depending on demand.

"Given the age and demographic of this area, (a joint replacement specialist) made good sense," said Carl Gerlach, chief executive officer at the hospital.

Freeto returned to Wine Country in July after completing his sports medicine fellowship at the Medical College of Wisconsin. The Napa native was eager to return to his hometown, and it was a natural expansion of his practice to also see patients in Sonoma.

"There was never any question I wanted to come back to this region," Freeto said.

Freeto is one of many doctors in his family. His father, Dr. David Freeto, is a prominent gastroenterologist in Napa while his brother is an emergency room physician and his sister is in internal medicine.

"Holidays are really boring at our house," Freeto said with a laugh. But he is the only surgeon in the bunch.

"Orthopedics is fun. It's very hands on, you actually have a finished product at the end."

For the time being, Freeto will spend Mondays working in Sonoma. He has also made his services available to the emergency room to lend a hand on any traumas that come to the hospital.

Freeto said he will operate on his patients at Sonoma Valley Hospital "subject to availability in the operating room, but I plan to keep patients in town as much as possible."

While presenting his updated business plan to the Sonoma Valley Health Care District board last week, Gerlach said the hospital's financial success is less about developing one line of business and more about cutting overhead across the board.

However, there are some lucrative services, such as orthopedic surgery, where the hospital can grow financially.

Orthopedic surgery not only has higher reimbursement rates from most insurance providers, it also involves imaging, lab services and often physical therapy, bringing in more departments and more money.

Chief Financial Officer Tim Noakes said when the hospital's busiest orthopedic surgeon shifted most of his patients to a surgery center in Novato, the hospital lost one-third of its imaging business.

"We need to recapture the business we once had," Noakes said during the March board meeting.

In his business plan, Gerlach showed how the hospital continues to lose market share for all surgical



DR. BRIAN FREETO is the newest orthopedic surgeon to begin working at Sonoma Valley Hospital. Robbi Pengelly/Index-Tribune

procedures. In 2005, the hospital captured 40 percent of the market share of outpatient surgical procedures, which fell to 30 percent in 2008. Gerlach said recapturing that market share could bring an additional \$1.6 million into the hospital annually.

"Over 400 (orthopedic) surgeries were done outside of this Valley on district residents (in 2008)," Gerlach said.

By bringing in more physicians, there will be a larger medical base for patients to rely on and a larger medical staff to perform surgeries locally.