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Written by [Mark Sanchez](#)



The private Homer Stryker M.D. School of Medicine that's affiliated with Western Michigan University is building out the fourth and fifth floors of the W.E. Upjohn campus in downtown Kalamazoo to house the new Center for Clinical Research.

COURTESY PHOTO

The formation of a unit to oversee clinical research puts another key element in place for the **Homer Stryker M.D. School of Medicine** in Kalamazoo.

The private medical school affiliated with **Western Michigan University** created the Center for Clinical Research with the **Borgess Research Institute** and **Bronson Research Services**. The center will support clinical research at **Borgess Medical Center** and **Bronson Methodist Hospital** in Kalamazoo.

The center's July opening represents a milestone for the medical school, which began instruction for its first class of students just last fall.

"This is a natural next step in the development of the medical school that will support clinical research across all of Kalamazoo," said Hal Jenson, the dean of the School of Medicine. "This is really the start of strengthening research at the medical school."

Amy Shipley, chief research officer at the Borgess Research Institute, serves as the medical school's assistant dean for research compliance. Thomas Blok, director of research services at Bronson, serves as assistant dean for clinical research.

The medical school is renovating the fourth and fifth floors of the downtown Kalamazoo W.E. Upjohn campus to house the new research center and laboratories.

The \$10 million project is targeted for completion by the end of the year, Jenson said.

As the renovation continues, the medical school is working to recruit a leader who will develop basic research conducted both in local labs and with patients in human clinical trials at Bronson and Borgess hospitals and their associated medical practices. The Center for Clinical Research will support second, third and fourth phase clinical trials.

Bronson and Borgess partnered with WMU to form the medical school. Having the two health systems roll their research operations into the Center for Clinical Research — rather than building a research unit from the ground up on its own — is "priceless" for the medical school, Jenson said.

"Both have well-established clinical research relationships with sponsors across multiple therapeutic areas and support a large number of active clinical trials overseen by experienced investigators throughout Kalamazoo," he said. "We're building on the legacy and the strength of the clinical research that has gone on in Kalamazoo since the time Homer Stryker was here."

Homer Stryker was an orthopedic surgeon, inventor and businessman who founded **Stryker Corp.**

The Homer Stryker M.D. School of Medicine began instruction nearly a year ago with an inaugural class of 54 medical students from a field of more than 3,500 applicants. The second-year class, which starts Aug. 10, will have 60 students that were chosen from among more than 4,000 applicants.

Enrollment for the incoming class in 2016 will expand to 72 medical students and then to a cap of 84 the following year.

Partners say the new clinical research center can lead to an increase in the number of clinical trials occurring in Kalamazoo and can improve patient access to experimental drugs, medical devices and therapies that are under development.

"It is our hope that through the new Center for Clinical Research, we will have an increased number of clinical trials available to our community," said Cheryl Knapp, vice president and chief quality officer at Bronson Healthcare Group. "While this joint entity creates an even better support system for medical school faculty, residents, students, community clinicians and other research participants, we look forward to providing enhanced care to the community."

Prior to the formation of the new center, Bronson, Borgess and the medical school all pursued their research independently. By creating an organization that combines the efforts of all three, "it's really bringing it together to better support (medical research) and to make it more efficient, and to make it available across the entire community," Jenson said.

Having a single, larger organization comprised of the medical school and the two local health systems provides the capacity to lure more clinical research trials to the area, he said.

"It will help us to be more attractive to bring sponsors of funding and clinical trials to Kalamazoo because rather than looking at Kalamazoo as being three small research working groups, now there's one larger group," Jenson said. "It now gives us enough of a critical size that we will be able to do many more trials than we would have been able to do previously."

Likewise, the research center can also help all three partners attract medical talent and faculty.

Physicians generally like to work in a setting where they have access to the newest therapies, some of which are experimental and going through clinical trials, and they want an opportunity to become involved in research or teaching, according to Jenson.

"They want to be in an environment where there is a culture of discovery and learning, and having clinical trials in place helps advance that," Jenson said. "So this does help with physician recruitment and retention, not only for the medical school but for Borgess and Bronson as well."

The idea of pulling together to better coordinate research assets and efforts is also a driver of the School of Medicine's proposed acquisition of the **Southwest Michigan Innovation Center Inc.**'s assets.

In a proposed deal that is now going through an extended approval process and that has the backing of university trustees, the medical school would acquire the land, building and equipment of the business incubator, located in WMU's Business Technology and Research Park. The School of Medicine would use the facility for medical research.

"It's part of that alignment strategy of making sure that we are creating a continuum of life and health sciences, as opposed to a whole bunch of individual players," said Ron Kitchens, CEO of **Southwest Michigan First** that was a partner in the formation of the Innovation Center more than a decade ago. "We know we have to maximize efficiency if we are going to maximize opportunity."

Formation of the Center for Clinical Research also can help the School of Medicine attain a level of accreditation that's required for human research, Jenson said.

Staff Writer Nick Manes contributed to this story.

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