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Larry Kolvoord
AMERICAN-STATESMAN

(enlarge photo)

Dr. Andrea Natale, left, seen working with Samuel Moore, a cardiovascular technician, will head the Texas Cardiac Arrhythmia Institute at St. David's Medical Center.

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HEALTH CARE

St. David's lands pioneer cardiac specialist to lead new institute

Hospital investing \$36 million and expects Dr. Andrea Natale to transform area's heart care landscape

By [Mary Ann Roser](#)
AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Thursday, May 01, 2008

St. David's HealthCare has hired an internationally known heart specialist at its flagship hospital and is investing \$36 million to create an institute to provide treatment to patients and training to doctors from around the world in heart rhythm disorders, hospital officials announced today.

The Texas Cardiac Arrhythmia Institute at St. David's Medical Center, which launched today, also will do research. The bulk of the money will go to build a \$22 million patient wing — which is in the design phase with no opening date set — to handle hundreds of more patients a year, said Jon Foster, president and CEO of St. David's HealthCare. It is headed by Dr. Andrea Natale, who was lured to Austin after a falling out at the Cleveland Clinic, one of the nation's top hospitals, where Natale worked from 1999 until October.

"Much like when Sematech came in the '80s to Austin and put Austin on the world map in high tech, this will be looked at in the not-too-distant future as a watershed moment when Austin got put on the map internationally" in treating heart disorders, Foster said.

Natale is a pioneer in treating atrial fibrillation, an irregular heart rhythm in the upper chambers that occurs when the electrical signals in the heart become chaotic. It affects 2.2 million Americans, including 3 to 5 percent of people 65 and older, and can cause a stroke. The disorder is treated with medications but can require an ablation, or burning the heart tissue to create tiny scars that stop the electrical disturbances from occurring.

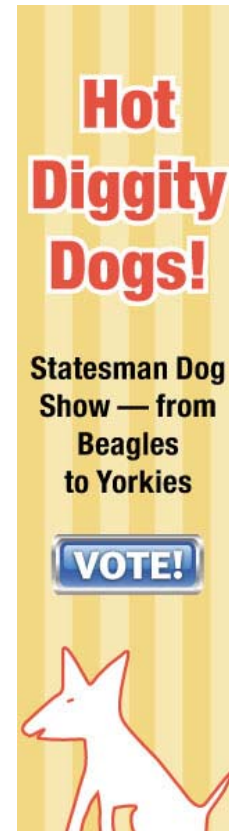
A colleague at St. David's, Dr. Robert Canby, said he expects Natale to do for Austin what famed heart surgeon Dr. Michael E. DeBakey did for Houston's reputation as a medical hub.

Natale, 47, is a specialist in ablation procedures and often uses a computerized navigational system, including a robot few hospitals besides St. David's have, to deliver catheters to make the repairs. He holds a patent on a catheter that is being developed.

In his new job, Natale is executive medical director of the institute, which includes seven other electrophysiologists from the established group Texas Cardiac Arrhythmia. The group does about 2,500 ablations a year, 600 of which are for atrial fibrillation, Natale said.

He said he performed an ablation on filmmaker Francis Ford Coppola several years ago in California. And when former Italian Premier Silvio Berlusconi needed a pacemaker, Berlusconi went to the Cleveland Clinic in 2006 and had Natale, who was born in Siracusa, Italy, implant it.

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lefty wrote:

Warm congratulations to Austin, my home in the 2950s and 1961. I've had the ablation procedure to correct a runaway heartbeat and a pacemaker to correct plunging heart rate, and I'm certain that they had a great deal to do with keeping me alive for more than 74 years. Joseph Benham, Kerrville

5/1/2008 6:41 PM CDT

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ron wrote:

when this new doctor comes he will bring research money, part of that money will be used to study and develop new treatment. so sign up as a research subject and hope for the best.

5/1/2008 3:36 PM CDT

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abby wrote:

And who will be able to afford to see this new doctor? 2% of patients with this heart problem are being treated for it. The rest of us can't muster the money, and/or have no health insurance.

5/1/2008 2:20 PM CDT

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The Cleveland Clinic did not renew Natale's contract in October because he was "not following the policies," spokeswoman Eileen Sheil said. She declined to elaborate.

Published reports in Cleveland said the clinic acted unilaterally to end the relationship, to Natale's surprise, because it claimed he was treating patients elsewhere without permission.

"I was the No. 1 moneymaker for the institution and I had been for many years," said Natale, adding that he saw the patients on his vacation time. "It was disappointing to see what they did."

Natale, a 1985 graduate of the Medical School at the University of Florence, Italy, said he believes strongly in training physicians and treating patients, regardless of whether they're in the hospital where he practices.

There is a lack of electrophysiologists in the world to treat a growing number of people with atrial fibrillation, partly a result of an aging population, Canby and Natale said.

"Right now, we're taking care of less than 2 percent of the patients with this problem," Natale said. "That's why it's important to prepare the next generation of physicians to take care of this problem."

Natale said St. David's had all of the elements he wanted: a talented team of specialists, a supportive hospital and a shared vision for training doctors from around the world.

One of the new institute's key competitors, the Heart Hospital of Austin, said it welcomes Natale and agrees he will help attract patients from around the country.

"With two facilities touting the latest technological advances in the cardiovascular field and outstanding physicians trained in the best schools in the U.S., patients in Central Texas are well served," said David Laird, president and CEO of the Heart Hospital.

His hospital recently invested \$8.5 million in expanding services for treating patients with similar heart rhythm disorders. Doctors there also do substantial research and training of other doctors, Laird said.

"We salute St. David's in making our medical community even stronger," Laird said. "We are all on the same mission."

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