

Merry Christmas The Journal



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The gift of life

BY EMILY GEDDE
Staff Writer

Duayne and Nancy Johnson are counting their blessings this holiday season.

Last year at this time, a failing heart caused Duayne to spend Christmas in a hospital room surrounded by doctors, machines and mediocre food from the cafeteria.

But this year, the couple who still hold hands after 43 years of marriage say the spirit of the season is a little brighter after Duayne received the greatest gift of all — life.

In June, the retired Falls High School athletic director and active community member received a new heart allowing him to potentially live a longer, healthier life.

“I sit back and marvel at the fact that this has happened,” Duayne told The Journal. “I was actually able to be the recipient of a new heart. It’s a miracle.”

Duayne suffers from amyloidosis — a condition where amyloid, or insoluble fibrous, proteins are abnormally deposited in organs or tissues and cause harm. Symptoms vary widely depending upon where in the body amyloid

deposits accumulate.

In Duayne’s case, the deposits got comfortable in his heart and would not allow the muscle to relax, he explained.

“It cannot be stopped,” the 69-year-old said of the condition he was diagnosed with six years ago. “Once the heart cannot relax and fill with blood, it doesn’t have enough blood to pump. When it doesn’t have enough blood to pump, it could be a long, slow end.”

The diagnosis left a heart transplant as Duayne’s only sur-



STAFF PHOTO BY EMILY GEDDE

Nancy and Duayne Johnson say they are thankful Duayne’s new heart will lead him toward a longer, healthier life.

Life to A7 ➤

UCare reps address local concerns

BY EMILY GEDDE
Staff Writer

Koochiching County commissioners last week appeared to have eased their concerns regarding the county’s managed care provider.

Representatives of UCare met with the county board Dec. 17 to address concerns expressed by commissioners and county staff. UCare will soon be the only managed care provider to service county residents who qualify for medical assistance.

“Today is about starting on a new foot, a better foot,” Stephanie Schwartz, UCare’s director of government relations, told commissioners.

Schwartz and two of her colleagues traveled to Borderland last week by invitation of commissioners at a Dec. 12 appeal hearing in the Twin Cities. Commissioners attended the hearing to encourage state officials to allow at least two care providers to service county clients on medical assistance.

As of Jan. 1, UCare, which provides coverage to more than 300,000 members in Minnesota and portions of Wisconsin, will be the only provider available to county clients. That has frustrated commissioners and Terry Murray, director of the county’s Community Services Department. UCare will see gains from state contracts in 27 counties, 13 in which it is the sole provider.

A contract with UCare was terminated about two years ago by Koochiching County after Murray said the company could not effectively provide transportation to clients to medical facilities outside the county. The contract was renewed in July, however, and Murray has said he wouldn’t have selected UCare as the county’s only provider had he known other providers would not be available.

Carol Berg, public health and county manager in government relations at UCare, said UCare is aware it took “longer than we wanted” to contract with Arrowhead Transit, which provides transportation for the county’s medical assistance clients who need it.

“We have been in conversation with Arrowhead Transit for about a year and a half,” she said. “I think there was some miscommunication or misinformation about the process they would use to bill UCare for

rides...Finally, I think it was understood what the relationship would be and they contracted with us last summer.”

Rides, Berg said, must be scheduled two days prior to medical appointments, with exceptions made for acute care.

“We want to hear from (clients) on what is the easiest process to ensure rides exceeding 30 miles for primary care or 60 miles for specialty care,” she said.

In addition to transportation concerns, Commissioner Wade Pavleck said during the Dec. 12 hearing that commissioners said they felt the county was receiving unequal treatment by having only one provider.

“The decision (to have only one provider) was made without input from the counties,” he told The Journal. “Prior to this, we had three.”

Commissioner said the board felt “discriminated against” because of Koochiching’s remote location.

“Having one provider here should be OK, but why don’t other areas have just one, too?,” Pavleck said.

“It was nothing against UCare,” Commissioner Brian McBride said of the decision to only have one provider in the county. “We question (DHS) more than you.”

Pavleck said commissioners were also concerned about prior complaints made by local providers about UCare.

Berg said as soon as the company heard from DHS that it would be the sole health plan in several counties, include Koochiching, “We actively called all the providers...to be sure things were going well and if there were any concerns we should be addressing.”

She said there were no concerns from Koochiching providers.

“Of all the providers I have contacted, we’ve had very positive feedback,” said Laurie Carlson, provider services field representative with UCare.

Murray said there were letters with concerns he was aware of from providers and said he would get those letters to UCare representatives.

Berg continued UCare focuses on partnerships it has with counties, providers and clients.

“We rely on local providers

UCare to A7 ➤



STAFF PHOTOS BY EMILY GEDDE

Mrs. Claus cradles 4-week-old Adalynn Mayfield Sunday at the children’s Christmas party hosted by the Ranier Recreation Club. For more photos, turn to page A10.

FESTIVE FUN

Children who attended Sunday’s Christmas party in Ranier got their fill of holiday fun with a visit from Santa and Mrs. Claus, a show from Grandpa Magic and plenty of treats. The event, hosted by the Ranier Recreation Club, saw a better turnout this year than previous years.



Grandpa Magic attempts to trick Adam Mayfield during the Christmas party’s magic show.



Hailey Lagoo dons a Santa hat for the party.