History of St. Christopher’s Hospital for Children

St. Christopher’s Hospital for Children opened its doors on November 30, 1875 as a charitable ambulatory pediatric clinic in a small second story room at 552 Dauphin Street – the industrial are of Kensington, Philadelphia, with a population of about 100,000 working class people. The area was also full of children who were in desperate need of healthcare; it was a time when the incidence of acute infectious diseases and infant mortality were distressingly high. Public assistance was virtually nonexistent, and medical assistance was almost wholly dependent upon those who were charitably inclined.

Dr. William H. Bennett, the founder of St. Christopher’s, enlisted the help of Children’s Seashore House of Atlantic City to establish St. Christopher’s. While working at Episcopal Hospital, Dr. Bennett recognized the need for a special children’s hospital in that section of Philadelphia. The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, founded 20 years earlier, was then at 22nd Street, near Walnut Street, and was too far for the practical needs of the Kensington Community.

Dr. Bennett acted as a physician, apothecary, recorder, and business manager, treating all patients and preparing all medications, which he dispensed all at a fee of five cents per patient visit, a fee that was collected only if the patient could pay.

Early in its existence, St. Christopher’s developed a commitment to social service and outreach in pediatric healthcare delivery. In 1880, Job Lewis Smith, in a plan for reducing the great mortality among young children, suggested that district visitors working out of the dispensary be appointed to visit each family that had children and to establish a friendly relationship with the family. A visitor’s duty was to document the state of cleanliness, furniture arrangement, condition of clothing, food, method of cooking, and ask she became integrated into the family. The visitor would impart instructions on the hygienic management of the children and if needed, would positively impact the habits of the family, as they would lead to a better state of health and disease prevention.

The Board of Lady Visitors continued as the hospital matured. This group would act as a communicating link between the hospital and the community. Some would provide transportation to the hospital for mothers and children, some distributed coal, food, milk, and other necessities needed to survive in a healthy manner. These efforts and others, secured as part of the hospital’s mission: a commitment to community pediatric medicine and preventative medicine.

Under Dr. Bennett’s leadership, St. Christopher’s was expanded to include overnight bed space and isolation areas to protect children from airborne contagions. In 1890, the main building was completed, raising the number of beds to 43. A legacy from Dr. George S. Pepper subsidized the Pepper Ward. Contiguous properties continued to be acquired to enhance nursing space and dispensary activity until the great depression halted expansion for many years.

After WWII, Dr. Waldo Nelson moved St. Christopher’s academy affiliation from the University of Pennsylvania to Temple University in 1947. This marked a new era for St. Christopher’s. Dr. Nelson rapidly built a department of pediatrics that attracted worldwide attention. Teaching and research assumed equal importance with patient care, and St. Christopher’s exploded into one of the world’s greatest comprehensive pediatric medical centers. In 1952, weekly programs presented continuous medical education for general practitioners and have since become a tradition at St. Christopher’s. The hospital’s first hearing and speech clinic was also introduced in 1952.

The Child Psychiatric Center was established in 1955 and staffed by 19 professionals, serving 43 emotionally disturbed children. Pediatric psychiatry evolved rapidly and in 1959, the Child Psychiatric Services and soon after, by the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology. That year, St. Christopher’s also established the largest cystic fibrosis center for children on the east coast.
In the 1970s, St. Christopher’s became the first hospital in the U.S. to establish a tracheotomy unit for infants and children. In 1972, physicians at St. Christopher’s performed the first pediatric kidney transplant in the Delaware Valley.

In 1985, the hospital quickly became a major transplant center with the first pediatric liver transplant and the first pediatric heart transplant in the region. The hospital also performed the first kidney/liver transplant. In addition, St. Christopher’s established the first pediatric burn center between Boston and Washington, DC, and became the first hospital in the world to use oxygen-rich liquid ventilation to help critically ill, premature newborns to breathe.

The 1990s brought even greater advances in the delivery of pediatric medicine to St. Christopher’s, including expanding transplant services, the use of electrical mapping to locate and remove brain tumors in pediatric patients, and the establishment of the region’s first grief support group.

In 1990, after 106 years at its location on Fifth Street and Lehigh Avenue, St. Christopher’s relocated to its present location on 160 East Erie Avenue in Philadelphia.

In 2014, St. Christopher’s was the only pediatric hospital in the state and one of only nine nationally to be listed as a Top Children’s Hospital by The Leapfrog Group. The Leapfrog Top Children’s Hospital award is given to hospitals that demonstrate excellence in hospital safety and quality and is given to less than seven percent of eligible hospitals. St. Chris, also celebrated in 2014, the opening of the Center for the Urban Child, which provides children with comprehensive services to help break the cycles of food insecurity, violence, and childhood illness.

In 2015, St. Christopher’s once again achieved Magnet status and numerous awards to St. Christopher’s physicians, who are frequently recognized in regional and national publications as “Top Docs” in their fields of expertise.

In April 2016, St. Christopher’s opened the Critical Care Tower, which is home to a brand new neonatal unit, expanded dental unit, a larger gym for physical and occupational therapies and more.

Today, St. Christopher’s is a 189-bed hospital that is committed to delivering high quality patient-centered care to children throughout the greater Delaware Valley. Its highly acclaimed programs include the highest level of pediatric trauma care and neonatal care, a Heart Center, Oncology unit and the only dedicated pediatric burn center in the region. St. Christopher’s also has one of the busiest emergency departments for children in the country, with over 70,000 annual visits. In addition to the free-standing hospital in Philadelphia, St. Christopher’s has five specialty pediatric locations, four general pediatric offices, outpatient pediatric therapy, sports therapy, and an urgent care center throughout PA and NJ.

Through affiliations with Drexel University College of Medicine, Temple University School of Medicine, and Albert Einstein Medical Center, St. Christopher’s is a teaching hospital helping to train the next generation of professionals in pediatric medicine. For more than 60 years, the hospital has been dedicated to not only the education and training of physicians, but, also to that of nurses and other allied health professionals. We see undergraduate and graduate nursing students from several colleges and universities including: Drexel University, Villanova University, Thomas Jefferson University, Holy Family and LaSalle University.

To learn more about St. Christopher’s, call 215-427-5000 or 1-888-CHRISKIDS (247-4754). Find us on social media at facebook.com/stchrishospital, youtube.com/stchrisvideos, pinterest.com/stchrishospital, and on instagram at @stchrishospital and twitter at @stchrishospital.