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**Prairie Heart Institute at St. John's Hospital earns accreditation
for fetal echocardiography lab**

SPRINGFIELD – St. John's Hospital is the first hospital in the state to be awarded accreditation for its fetal echocardiography laboratory by the Intersocietal Commission for the Accreditation of Echocardiography Laboratories (ICAEL). Accreditation is voluntary and signifies that an institution has achieved the gold standard in quality for diagnosis of heart disease.

Pediatric cardiologist Dr. Ramzi T. Nicolas, an assistant professor of pediatrics at Southern Illinois University School of Medicine, and registered cardiac sonographers perform fetal echocardiograms to diagnose heart abnormalities in unborn babies. The test uses ultrasound technology, including a new special fetal probe, to provide images of babies' hearts to evaluate the anatomy, function and the blood flow to the heart.

“Being able to perform these tests on babies before birth means we can find congenital heart defects or fetal heart arrhythmias, critical information needed to be able to intercede and provide life-saving medical care,” explained Nicolas, director of SIU's pediatric cardiology division and director of echocardiology at St. John's Children's Hospital. “For other families, we can provide peace of mind, letting them know that their baby is doing fine and has no heart problems.”

Diagnosing heart disease before birth helps achieve the best possible outcome for the

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baby. Depending on the diagnosis, the baby may be treated by giving the mother medication. In other cases, the test allows for preparations to be made so that a surgical team is standing by when the baby is born. Some infants may go immediately to open heart surgery when they are born.

Fetal echocardiograms are recommended if there is a family history of congenital heart disease; if a sibling was born with a congenital heart defect; if a routine ultrasound exam indicates a heart defect; if a chromosomal or genetic abnormality is discovered in the fetus; or if the mother is taking certain medications or has certain conditions. They are usually performed in the second trimester of pregnancy at 18 to 24 weeks.

Although learning that an unborn baby has a serious heart abnormality can be devastating to parents, knowing about it ahead of time gives families a chance to educate and prepare themselves ahead of time.

“We’re very proud of this national accreditation, which demonstrates our ongoing, long-term commitment to achieving the highest standards for quality patient care,” said Nicole Horve, supervisor of cardiac sonography at Prairie Heart, who led the efforts to gain accreditation.

Training for the Prairie Heart sonographers was provided by Nicolas, who joined SIU’s faculty and St. John’s Children’s Hospital staff in 2005. He previously completed a one-year interventional cardiology fellowship and a three-year pediatric cardiology fellowship at St. Louis Children’s Hospital/Washington University (2005, 2004). St. John’s Children’s Hospital combines the faculty resources of SIU School of Medicine with the pediatric facilities and services of St. John’s. It is accredited by the National Association of Children's Hospitals and Related Institutions.

Prairie Heart Institute at St. John’s Hospital is also accredited by the ICAEL for adult echocardiography and pediatric transthoracic echocardiography for diagnosis of infants, children and adolescents born with congenital or acquired heart disease.

The ICAEL provides a peer-review mechanism that encourages and recognizes the provision of quality echocardiographic evaluations. Accreditation status signifies that the facility has been reviewed by an independent agency that recognizes the laboratory's commitment to quality testing for the diagnosis of heart disease.

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