

Birth-control ban is eased at Dominican

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Doctors can perform tubal ligations in some cases.

BY LEE QUARNSTROM
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For the first time, Dominican Hospital in Santa Cruz will allow a birth-control surgical procedure to be performed in some cases.

The Catholic institution has come under fire for refusing to allow doctors to perform tubal ligations on women who are patients in the hospital.

The issue surfaced in the wake of Dominican's purchase of Community Hospital of Santa Cruz about 2½ years ago. Until then, women in northern Santa Cruz County who wanted tubal ligations on an inpatient basis could have them done at non-denominational Community Hospital.

But since that purchase, local reproductive-rights activists have complained that the only facility in the county where women could have their tubes tied on an inpatient basis was Watsonville Community Hospital. The procedure has been available on an outpatient basis at a few clinics in the county.

On Thursday, Sister Julie Hyer, chief administrator of Dominican, said the new Catholic bishop for the Diocese of Monterey has al-

lowed the hospital to "broaden" its tubal-ligation policy. She said the bishop had determined that Catholic ethical policies will allow doctors to "make decisions on a case-by-case basis when those decisions relate to curing, reducing or preventing a serious pathological condition" in patients.

County health officials were pleased with the decision.

"I think it's wonderful," said Elinor Hall, administrator of the county health services agency.

The decision on whether to allow tubal ligations was in the hands of Bishop Thaddeus Shubsda when he died in the spring of 1991. The decision was put on hold until his replacement was named.

His successor, Bishop Sylvester Ryan, said Thursday the long debate over tubal ligations — most frequently performed during Caesarean section birth — still boils

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down to abiding by the church's ethical policies for Catholic health facilities.

"The question was," he said, "How can the hospital maintain its integrity and its identity as a Catholic facility and still reach out to meet the needs of the community?"

He said criticism that Shubsda had been too stubborn in not deciding to allow the birth-control procedure was not well-founded.

"Bishop Shubsda agonized over the question," Ryan said. "He was not as rigid as he may have been perceived. The real difficulty was that his illness didn't allow him to act more quickly.

"I don't know that I'm any more liberal than Bishop Shubsda was."

"If a tubal ligation is performed purely for contraception" at a time other than a Caesarean section, Sister Julie said, "that is a classic case of an outpatient procedure. There are other places where tubal ligations can be performed on outpatients.

"When a doctor joins a Catholic hospital staff, he agrees to abide by certain ethical guidelines."

The health agency's Hall said the decision "answers the most pressing problem. It means that there won't be cases where women have to undergo surgery twice."

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