

Board tosses base-station hot potato

By JAMIE MARKS

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SANTA CRUZ — Supervisors voted unanimously to kick the decision on base-station hospitals for the countywide paramedic program into the lap of the public health officer.

After an hour-long hearing Tuesday morning, supervisors voted unanimously to give the decision to Dr. George Wolfe, who is head of the Health Services Agency's public health department.

Supervisors further directed Wolfe to try to strike a compromise that would resolve the dispute between Dominican Hospital and Community Hospital of Santa Cruz.

They gave the decision to Wolfe because under state law, the Emergency Medical Service Agency (in this county the HSA) is responsible for making the decisions on emergency treatment and care.

And, as Supervisor Gary Patton said, "The decisions are medical and should not be made at the political level."

Wolfe had proposed the board approve contracts designating Dominican Hospital and Watsonville Community Hospital as base stations for the paramedic program, and Santa Cruz Community Hospital as lead agency in the cardiopulmonary resuscitation program.

As base stations, he told supervisors, the hospitals would have radio communication with ambulance crews trained in advanced life-support techniques. The staff at the base station hospitals would begin life-saving techniques via radio, but direct the patients to the nearest hospital in emergencies or the hospital of their choice.

Wolfe said he disputed the notion that his recommendation implied one hospital was better than the other. "We don't see a great advantage of one hospital over the other. In north county, we are basing our decision on historical commitment," said Wolfe.

Since 1978, Dominican Hospital has invested its own time and money in a pilot project with the Aptos Fire Department for a paramedic program. It has already bought the radio equipment used in the base station hospital, said Wolfe.

Of paramount concern to Community Hospital, according to two witnesses, was the idea that the facility would lose patients as a result of not being picked as a base station.

Supervisors directed Wolfe and the Emergency Medical Care Commission to closely monitor the patient flow to the hospitals and make any changes to the program if problems arise.

Also, the two Community Hospital doctors felt the proposal was designed to exclude them from the paramedic program. After a year of working with the county and Dominican Hospital on criteria and procedures for the paramedic plan, they asked to be included in its daily workings.

"We do not equate citizen CPR instruction with Advanced Life Support..." said Dr. Alan Buchwald, director of Community Hospital's emergency room. "For that reason, we question the current proposal."

Buchwald said Community Hospital has a "state-of-the-art" emergency room with a well-trained staff. All the doctors are either board-certified or board-eligible in emergency-room techniques.

He said Community Hospital could cut the \$100,000 estimated start-up costs significantly and suggested the county not proceed until closed bids were sought from the hospitals.

He also argued that Community Hospital's future heart center will make it equivalent to a trauma center, suited to handle chest injuries and the like.

However, Diana Jackson, a Dominican Hospital mobile intensive-care nurse who has worked with the Aptos Fire Department's paramedic program, countered that in other communities, the trauma centers are usually not the base stations.

Orange County, for example, has three base-station hospitals, she said. None of them is a trauma center, she said.

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"If we have several base stations, the quality of care may be diminished," said Jackson. It's estimated that the base station hospital will receive six to eight paramedic calls a day, she said. The Aptos paramedic program gets about one to two calls a day, Jackson said.

"It's difficult to maintain quality care with such a low volume," she said.

Dr. Gary Klapman, another Community Hospital physician, said he was "a bit skeptical" of the assurances given by the county that the number of patients sent to each hospital would not be affected.

"People in the public will look at base-station hospitals as having more expertise," he said, adding that the ensuing publicity would promote that view.

He said the proposal would divide the local medical community. Already, he said, "some people like to talk about the corporate American Medical International" that runs Community Hospital. Yet, he said, the (Catholic) sisters who run Dominican Hospital "represent one of the largest landowners in the world."

Klapman said it was "ironic, if not shameful" for the board to close its eyes to the issue.

Only one supervisor, Wayne Moore from the Pajaro Valley, was moved to suggest the board postpone action Tuesday and consider open bids. It died for lack of a second.