

Hospitals - Dominican Doctors, hospital at odds over emergency room shifts

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SANTA CRUZ — Doctors who had threatened not to answer the call at Dominican Hospital's emergency room have put off a proposed boycott.

After months of discussions, 35 doctors from the family practice department decided last week not to take action until discussing the matter further on March 9. No formal vote was taken to determine how many favored a boycott, which would have begun Monday.

The dispute is over whether all doctors should have to work a rotating schedule in

the ER. Dominican requires doctors to work a 24-hour on-call shift about every six weeks in exchange for hospital privileges. Some family-practice doctors said they want the hospital to pay them for working the shifts.

Dominican cannot afford to pay doctors for ER work, said Dr. Larimore Cummins, the hospital's senior vice president and chief medical officer. If family-practice doctors were to be paid for working on-call, then the hospital's entire medical staff of 350 people also would have to be compensated for such work, he added.

"No hospital could afford to do anything like that," said Cummins.

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In all, 20 doctors are on call at any one time, he said. Only one of the 20 comes from family practice, and a boycott by family-practice physicians would have little impact, he said.

"We don't feel the need to be concerned about (ER) patients not having a doctor," Cummins said.

The hospital has offered to contribute any money saved by standardizing procedures to a general fund, which is shared by the entire medical staff. The staff then could decide to give that money to the family practice doctors if they wish, Cummins said.

Right now, physicians in the emergency room receive whatever they can collect from patients themselves. In cases where ER patients have neither insurance nor Medi-Cal and cannot pay the bill, doctors receive no payment.

But money is only part of the issue, said Dr. Philip Yule, a family-practice physician with Santa Cruz Medical Clinic. ER work is particularly grueling, he said.

"Many of the patients you wind up admitting on these ER nights are people you don't know, never see again, have a number of social problems and they're often very angry," he said. "It's not very gratifying."

If an ER patient needs further treatment and is admitted to the hospital, the doctor who treated that person in the ER must tend to him until he checks out.

That can mean follow-up visits for another two weeks, taking away from time doctors can spend with patients from their own private practices, said Yule. Late-night calls and follow-up visits also interfere with doctors' personal lives, he added.

Still, Yule said he could not support the idea of a boycott. Doctors would risk losing their hospital privileges for violating the medical staff bylaws, he said. And it could,

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create ill will.

"I don't think it would resolve the issue," Yule said, "and I wouldn't want to make myself the target of some kind of lawsuit."

State law requires hospitals to provide doctors for the emergency room 24 hours a day. Federal law holds the hospital liable if there are not enough doctors to care for ER patients.

The issue, however, is one of hospital policy and would best be resolved by the hospital and its staff, said Los Angeles attorney Robyn Meinhardt, who specializes in health care law.

"There's nothing that forces the physicians to be on the panel (of on-call ER doctors)," she said.

Doctors have few options if they do not wish to meet Dominican's requirements. In areas where there is more than one major hospital, doctors could go elsewhere for hospital privileges.

Santa Cruz County has another hospital, Watsonville Community Hospital, but it, too, requires "all active medical staff" to work the emergency room on call, according to spokeswoman Cory Allen.

Working the ER is just a part of being a doctor, said Dr. David Sannes, who operates a family practice in Scotts Valley. He said he would not support a boycott against Dominican.

"This is a community hospital,"

he said. "It's just one of those things that we have to do. It's a form of community service."

Besides, he said, he has picked up good patients who have stayed with him. Still, he sympathized with those who want compensation for working ER.

"Some of the doctors feel overwhelmed in the amount of time they have to put in (working)," Sannes said. "It's one more thing they feel they have to do."