

# More Cutbacks Discussed

## Watsonville Hospital Considers Closing Emergency Room Base Station As Part of Cost Cutting Plan

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Watsonville Hospital President John Friel confirmed his hospital is considering closing the South County's only emergency room base station as part of plans to cut expenses at his acute care center. Friel said that even services once considered vital to a community were being reexamined as hospital administrators struggle to hold the line on costs.

"Everything is on the blocks. ... [We are asking:] can we afford to operate this service in the future? Do we need two base stations in the communi-

ty?," Friel responded to the question of whether the hospital would be shutting its radio link with paramedics in the field. Friel confirmed the decision revolved around efforts to cut hospital overhead.

"We're looking at it from the perspective of cost. But we haven't come up with any decision at this time," Friel added.

Watsonville Hospital has been part of the Santa Cruz County Emergency Medical Services (EMS) plan since the early 1980s, and has provided staffing for the hospital base station radio that responds to medical calls from paramedics in field. Staffing of the base sta-

tion radio requires specially trained registered nurses to be on duty. These are mobile intensive care nurses who must respond to calls. Also, the hospital provides for the cost of a half time registered nurse to review the work of paramedics responding to emergencies in the field, a kind of "real time" quality assurance process that promises improved standards in pre-hospital care.

Should Watsonville Hospital administrators close their base station, the full load of responding to calls would fall to Dominican Santa Cruz

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Hospital emergency room nurses, leaving the county with only one emergency medical control center. Assuming Dominican Hospital were to accept the duty for responding to the calls, then paramedics in South County would radio to North County nurses for instructions, while enroute to the South County Hospital. If time permitted, a Dominican nurse would theoretically contact a Watsonville emergency room nurse by phone to relay a report of what treatments had been administered in the field. If time didn't permit, a patient would have to wait for the field paramedics to report to emergency room staff.

"I really have a difficult time imagining a single base station running the whole county out of the north end of the county," said Santa Cruz County EMS Medical Director Dr. Kent Benedict.

Dr. Benedict explained that the local emergency system typically relies on paramedics using established protocols

and standing orders to deliver emergency care in the field. However, in specific cases, like when a paramedic is presented with a complicated case or needs to administer certain kinds of medications, the paramedic must radio to the hospital base station for advice and/or orders from a nurse and/or physician.

Using the county's data collection system, EMS staff ran a survey of a four month period from August 1 to November 30, 1996. Based on this data, Watsonville Hospital receives about 180 calls per year, about half of the calls from paramedics requesting specific orders or advice from nurses about what kinds of care should be ordered.

Dr. Benedict said he was also worried that a lack of support services for paramedics would erode the quality of emergency care in South County.

"[Another] big part of what a base station does is continuing education for the medics. That's a big job," Dr. Benedict said. "Retrospective review of all the runs to the

hospital is [additionally] a big part of the job."

Currently, a registered nurse reviews all the cases in which paramedics deliver care, providing a regular opportunity to catch problems and

consider ways to improve the quality of care.

Dr. Benedict hopes that Watsonville Hospital administrators will find another way to save what is estimated to be about \$50,000 the station



**Should Watsonville Hospital officials decide to close their base station, all emergency medical radio calls from paramedics will be routed to Dominican's emergency room. South county patients will continue to be transported by ambulance to Watsonville Hospital for emergency care.**

costs to run each year, especially since he believes Dominican Hospital will not be able to pick up the additional work load.

Dominican Hospital Chief Financial Officer John Petersdorf said that the hospital was aware of the discussion surrounding the potential closing. Petersdorf reported that hospital officials were neither planning to consider decreasing or increasing services at the present time.

EMS director Don Hiatt echoed Dr. Benedict's concerns about the possible closure of the South County base station. He added that he was especially concerned about the timing of the proposed closure because a number of fire agencies are presently considering the expansion of paramedic services in the county.

"When you are bringing on new services, the need for medical control becomes even more important," said Hiatt.

There has been no specific timeframe set for the closure, however a decision about the future of the South County base station is expected within the next two months. □