

Heart-center fight taken to state

Community Hospital says state rules could stop Dominican's cardiac-surgery unit

By TOM LONG
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — AMI/Community Hospital officials say they have found state rules that could halt Dominican Hospital's planned cardiac-surgery unit, and will drop their appeal to the county to stop the center.

"Basically what we are going to do is take it out of the county and back to the state where it can be more appropriately dealt with," said Ann Klein, chief executive officer of AMI/Community. "In our investigation of who had jurisdiction we found that the state did have certain rules that govern the operation of an open heart surgery program and a cardiac

catheterization lab."

And Klein believes those rules — which recommend a minimum of 150 surgeries and 260 catheterizations annually — may be enough to shut down Dominican's program before it even opens.

"There's no way on earth that two or more facilities would be able to maintain the standards recommended by the state," Klein said.

About 275 county residents required open-heart surgery last year and it is estimated that at least 10 percent of cardiac surgeries would involve high-risk patients, and would have to be performed at larger hospitals outside the county. In addition, the number of heart surgeries performed nationally is on the decline as less risky treatments for heart problems

such as balloon angioplasty are becoming common.

AMI opened its long-planned cardiac surgery unit last October, just after Dominican announced plans to build a similar unit. Critics of Dominican's plans have charged that having two cardiac-surgery units within two miles of one another is both financially wasteful and a danger to patients.

The question of patient safety has been raised by numerous studies that have concluded that cardiac surgery teams performing a large number of surgeries are safest. An AMI survey of most of the doctors in the north county area found overwhelming support for the idea of just one cardiac-surgery unit.

AMI filed an appeal with the county Planning Department in June in an attempt to halt building plans at Dominican, claiming that a second cardiac unit would have an "adverse impact" on the community.

Klein said Thursday that while doing research on its case before the county the hospital discovered state guidelines governing heart surgery centers. "It's not something that's commonly referred to," Klein said of rules.

The recommended-minimum guidelines would usually be brought up when it comes time to license a cardiac-surgery unit, Klein said, and such licensing is usually done after all building is completed. But AMI is asking the state Department of Health Services to look at the situation now.

"What we're telling the state is that at some point you're going to be asked to license and we're telling you about this now so you can prospectively deal with the issue and there's no waste of resources," Klein said.

"It's a bit of a novel idea and we're not sure how they'll respond," Klein said. "Our only other alternative is to wait until the funds have been expended" to build the new heart center.

"This puts Dominican in a better position to re-allocate those dollars right now should the state find there's no use for another cardiac center," said A.J. Lindemann, AMI's chief operating officer.

"What we're after is better health planning for the community and our offer to discuss strategic positioning (of health services in the community) with all the hospitals is still open," said Lindemann.

Dominican officials could not be reached for comment Thursday night.