

Two heart centers a 'waste of lives'

By TOM LONG
Sentinel staff writer

SACRAMENTO

AMI/Community Hospital took its fight against Dominican Hospital's proposed heart surgery center to Sacramento Monday, claiming that the center could actually endanger lives.

"It's a waste in terms of money and resources, but the major concern is it's potentially a waste of lives," said Dr. Henry Zaretsky, former director of the Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development.

Zaretsky was one of two influential witnesses AMI brought to Sacramento to bolster its protest against Dominican's heart center. The other was Jonathan Showstack, a professor of Health Policy at UC San Francisco Medical Center, who is the author of numerous articles that argue that the safety of a cardiac surgery center is directly tied to the volume of surgeries it performs; the higher the volume, the safer the center.

AMI, which has had its Santa Cruz Heart Institute in operation for more than a year, is arguing that there are not enough potential heart surgery patients in the county to warrant two centers and that with two centers sharing the patients neither would have enough volume to support a safe program.

Zaretsky said that a study he had just completed indicated that by 1990 about 175 people a year might be candidates for open heart surgery performed in Santa Cruz County, and he said he thought that number is probably high. State licensing recommendations call for a minimum of 150 surgeries annually for each cardiac surgery center.

"It's definitely not going to be helping anyone to have two programs," Zaretsky said. "What are they going to be doing, grabbing surfers off the beach and opening them up?"

Zaretsky and Showstack appeared as paid expert witnesses for

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the hospital in a presentation before Theresa Hawks, Deputy Director of Licensing and Certification for the State Department of Health Services. AMI is attempting to convince the state not to issue Dominican the licenses it would need to offer cardiac surgery services.

Dominican Hospital was not present at the meeting. Hospital officials, when informed of the meeting, declined to comment.

When AMI decided to begin a cardiac surgery program in the early '80s, the hospital had to apply to the state for a "certificate of need" which would confirm that the community could make good use of such a program. AMI had to battle for the certificate because health officials were concerned that the area could not even support one cardiac surgery unit.

But after the state dropped requirements for such certification, Dominican announced plans for its own cardiac surgery center less than a mile away from AMI's. Critics in the medical profession

have charged that Dominican, which has annual earnings approximately double that of AMI's, wants to dominate the local hospital market.

AMI filed an appeal with the county in June, claiming that Dominican's cardiac surgery center would have an "adverse impact" on the community. But it withdrew that appeal in July when AMI lawyers discovered a regulation in the state licensing laws that requires a hospital to prove there are enough patients in its service area to keep a safe volume of patients using a cardiac surgery program.

Monday's meeting was strictly informational, according to Hawks.

"They just wanted to provide us with some information they thought was relevant," Hawks said. "We're really doing our own looking at the issue, although some of the information they gave us may have saved us some trouble."

Hawks said there is a similar controversy going elsewhere in California, and that the licensing department is going to have to review the regulation itself — with its

recommendation of a minimum of 150 surgeries a year — to see if it is still valid. Then it would have to review Dominican's application and talk to Dominican officials.

"We're just asking them to enforce a regulation they have," said Ann Klein, executive director of Community Hospital.

Hawks said that her department had not traditionally had to enforce the regulation because other health agencies were charged with such enforcement, but those agencies disappeared as a result of deregulation and now the licensing department is faced with making the decision. Hawks said the decision could have an impact on how hospitals throughout the state plan their development.

She said that she hoped to have the decision on whether Dominican could be licensed within a month.

"We're just asking Dominican to reconsider," said Klein. "They could spend a lot of financial resources for something that may not be licensed."