

Hospital center of dispute

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and BOB SMITH

Saying there isn't enough business in the Monterey Bay area, a regional health agency is recommending disapproval of an application by Community Hospital of Santa Cruz to open a heart surgery unit in Santa Cruz.

The Mid-Coast Health Systems Agency will hold a public hearing Wednesday at 7 p.m. in the classroom unit building of UC-Santa Cruz on the Community Hospital application.

David Wright, the agency's executive director, said today his staff doesn't believe Community can meet the minimum state standards for the number of operations a year, and contends that the heart unit would be very costly in terms of similar facilities in the Santa Clara Valley, and possibly even dangerous to the patient.

Because the hospital receives Medi-Cal and Medicare payments, it needs state approval before it can establish the new unit.

The approval process includes review by the Mid-Coast agency staff, a public hearing by the agency's board of directors, and then a recommendation forwarded to the state health department.

Community Hospital has been conducting an intense publicity campaign in the last few weeks,

seeking to generate community support for the application and asking the public to turn out for the public meeting.

Wright also wants the public to show up, but for a different reason.

"People have been sold a pig in a poke and we want people to look inside the bag," Wright said, contending that a heart surgery unit is not needed in the Monterey Bay area.

"A good comprehensive emergency medical service with training for EMTs and hospital linkage would do more to save the lives of heart attack victims," Wright said. "Health education — if you can get someone to stop smoking, you can cut heart disease. And all of these things don't require fancy, expensive facilities."

Wright said of the Community Hospital application: "The issues we are pulling out of the application is whether the hospital can project that they have the number of cases to offer the surgery in a cost-effective manner and do them safely."

"They haven't even demonstrated that they meet the minimum state criteria."

"We are concerned about the safety of the patient and the cost," Wright added.

"The AMI (the owners of Community Hospital) proposal will cost patients \$12 million more in five years (compared to the cost of the procedure at a

Santa Clara Valley hospital.)

Wright said it now costs \$19,000 for the catheterization and bypass surgery in a Santa Clara Valley hospital. He said the Community Hospital application projects the cost of the same operation at \$28,000.

"It will cost patients \$12 million more in five years," Wright contends.

At a press conference called today following the release of the report, Community Hospital Executive Director Jean Adams and cardiologist Dr. Raj Singh took exception to the agency report.

Adams called the \$12 million extra cost projection "a gross distortion."

"We are confident that in our rebuttal (to be delivered Wednesday night at the hearing) we will demonstrate that our costs are lower than the Santa Clara Valley."

Adams would not provide exact estimates today in his rebuttal to the agency report, and would only say that the hospital costs are "10-20 percent less" than the Santa Clara Valley hospitals.

"It will be less expensive to have heart surgery at Community Hospital than in Santa Clara Valley hospitals."

"I'm saying the Agency report is wrong," Adams added.

"This is an optional service with great cost and some risk to the patient," Wright added.