

Hospitals - Watsonville 11/16/82 Stateline
Hospital

Hospital plans to rewrite policy on indigent care

WATSONVILLE — Watsonville Community Hospital will rewrite its policy on care for the indigent to bring it into line with federal regulations.

The action comes after a two-year investigation by the federal Office of Civil Rights in the Department of Health and Human Services.

A complaint filed by the Welfare and Legal Assistance Center in 1980 sparked the investigation into allegations poor people and illegal aliens were discriminated against.

No evidence of wrongdoing or civil rights violations were uncovered.

"The deficiencies or violations were technical violations," said Floyd Adams, a division director for the Office of Civil Rights and an investigation supervisor. "There are no horror stories or anything of that sort."

The hospital's policies were based on the 1974 regulations of the Hill-Burton Act, which requires a hospital receiving federal construction funds to treat the indigent for free.

The federal regulations were updated in 1979, but hospital policies were not.

"This hospital has never turned away anyone because of indigence," said Mark Hucklebridge, director of community relations for the hospital. "We've been waiting for clarification of the 1979 law

from the feds, while they've been changing their minds about who's responsible for enforcing it."

Adams countered this, saying, "Ignorance of the law is no excuse. If they were waiting, they still had an obligation to make themselves aware and bring their policies into compliance."

The changes are in the hospital's policy dealing with admission of indigents — "Specifically, we're to drop any reference to indigent patients that might be seen as discriminatory," Hucklebridge said.

The community service policy needs to be rewritten, and the complaint filing procedure must be made clear, he said.

Adams said the hospital must make it clear to the community that emergency treatment is free, and must increase the number of bilingual staff members.

His office also recommended when the hospital provides a list of doctors, it designate which accept Medi-Cal, and that a policy be written for admitting indigent patients whose doctors don't have hospital privileges.

He stressed the hospital had been cooperative throughout the investigation and in accepting the recommendations.

The policy changes will be instituted within 60 to 90 days, Hucklebridge said, after the medical staff and hospital board approve them.