

Public drunks clogging hospitals

Action demanded to end 'sleeping it off' in ER practice

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HOSPITAL
Paramedics and doctors say public drunks' use of local emergency rooms to sleep off inebriated stupors is taking precious ambulances and hospital beds away from the patients who really need them.

Emergency professionals flooded county supervisor chambers Tuesday, demanding a change in law enforcement's use of emergency facilities to sober up public nuisances.

They found a receptive audience, as board members decried current practice and asked for change.

"I am outraged by this," supervisor Jan Beautz said. "I don't think we can waste resources like this at a time when we don't have them."

Representatives from American Medical Response, the county's ambulance service, said hundreds — if not thousands — of its hospital trips go toward taxiing public drunks every year. Some of the regulars call 911 themselves with "fabricated medical complaints," eager for a free warm bed and meal at the emergency room's

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expense, paramedics said.

Paramedics asked supervisors to dedicate money for sobering up facilities or more medical staff at the County Jail.

However, Beautz said the county shouldn't have to "buy bread and breakfast for these people" and they should be sent directly to jail because they "choose, in a way, this way to live."

Supervisor Jeff Almquist disagreed, saying supervisors can't make "moral judgments" about inebriates and that alternatives such as sobering up facilities or substance abuse programs should also be explored.

Dominican Hospital staff said they see three to five public drunks a day and must house them in beds that could go to more urgent patients. The hospital has only 16 beds available at any given time, and it's not uncommon for it to take up to 10 hours to clear the drunkards for release, said Dr. Marc Yellin.

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DR. MARC YELLIN,
DOMINICAN HOSPITAL

told supervisors.

Inebriates cost the hospital thousands of dollars yearly because they can rarely pay medical bills, Yellin said.

"It's a huge misuse of resources ... Yesterday we had three or four in the (ER) at one time," he said. "They're not low-maintenance patients. They're often unruly, falling out of bed and urinating on the floor... That takes up nursing care."

Inebriates are turned away from jails despite plentiful medical staff to monitor inmates, emergency professionals said. That's largely due to concerns the drunks may have other medical conditions not immediately visible, for which the county jail would be held liable, they said.

As a result, patrol officers now bring drunks straight to the ER for medical clearance when their wards just need to "sleep it off,"

paramedics said.

Jail medical staff also turn away arrestees with injuries as minor as a cut, scrape or bruise, paramedics and doctors said. In 2002, law enforcement brought 758 arrestees and inebriates to Dominican Hospital, according to Janet Slay, ER department manager.

Sheriff Mark Tracy said he plans to work with paramedics and doctors to develop guidelines for when public drunks' health is truly at risk. Paramedics can then use those rules to assess inebriates in the field and clear them for incarceration rather than taking them to the hospital, he said.

The jail has plenty of room for the population, he said. Already, the county jail books about 2,900 public drunks per year, he said.

"We have room," he said. "I foresee no added cost in terms of additional staff."

Supervisors asked the sheriff and health director to return in a month with guidelines for when hospitalization of public drunks is warranted. The board also asked for reports on available jail space and statistics on how often hospitals are housing them.

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