

Hospital strike shows no signs of abating

By JOHN ROBINSON

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WATSONVILLE — Registered nurses continued to picket Watsonville Community Hospital Sunday, and a hospital spokeswoman said that no immediate end to the strike is in sight.

"Nothing has changed. There is no progress on the talks and none are scheduled at this time," said Kathleen King, director of development at the hospital. "We hear a lot of rumors from nurses and other people at the hospital, but nothing is planned."

The nurses went on strike Saturday morning, demanding higher pay and better benefits. Talks between the hospital and the California Nurses Association, which represents 171 registered nurses at the hospital, broke down Friday after the association rejected the hospital's final contract offer.

The strike has shut down all acute care at the hospital, although the emergency room remains open as an urgent care clinic. The hospital's drug and alcohol treatment program is also functioning. Major surgery and intensive

care are no longer available at the hospital, and ambulance companies must carry patients to other facilities.

"The emergency room is functioning as an urgent care clinic, but not at 100 percent," King said. "It is fine for broken bones, colds and non-serious illness."

The emergency room treated 60 people Saturday. No one with serious injuries or major trauma was brought to the hospital during the weekend, King said.

A-1 Ambulance Company, which serves the south county, has been taking patients to Dominican Hospital or to Natividad Hospital in Salinas.

"We haven't had too many (serious) calls so that it has had an impact on us," Steve Brooks, a paramedic with A-1, said. "For us, it is business as usual — it is just a longer transport time. Our care is unchanged. We're able to use a full range of advanced life-support procedures that the county has authorized to use."

Saturday night an infant that later died was taken to Dominican Hospital

from the Watsonville area. A Dominican Hospital spokeswoman said the infant was not breathing when it arrived at Dominican Hospital. It is not known whether the additional travel time to Dominican Hospital contributed to the infant's death.

To handle the additional patients, Dominican Hospital has increased staff in its emergency room and other departments.

"Our emergency room is very busy," the Dominican Hospital spokeswoman said, "but it is hard to say whether it is due to the Fourth of July weekend or to the strike. It is a very busy weekend."

At Watsonville Community Hospital, the nurses' association is settling in for a long strike.

"Our morale is extremely high," said Willard Hatch, chief negotiator for the nurses' association. "We don't have any problems other than a recalcitrant employer."

Hatch said the nurses are asking for approximate parity of wages and benefits with Salinas Valley Memorial Hospital — terms that would make the

Watsonville nurse the best paid in Santa Cruz County. Strikers are asking for a salary range of \$32,309 to \$39,292 annually for a full-time nurse.

The nurses have asked for a 13-percent pay hike over two years with full medical benefits for part-time nurses. The hospital has offered a 16-percent raise over three years and "increased benefits."

"We have a benefit package which is inferior to the other hospitals in the area," Hatch said. "In the past two years we have caught up with Salinas Valley Memorial and we want to stay up with them."

According to Hatch the hospital is in a poor negotiating position due to a shortage of qualified nurses at other hospitals.

"There are no nurses begging for jobs — none. Just look at (ads in) the papers . . . With each passing week the number of nurses looking elsewhere (for work) is going to increase. It will hurt the hospital."

Hatch said no talks will be held until the hospital changes its position.