

Dominican agrees to treat disturbed inmates

Hospital - Dominican Hospital

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SANTA CRUZ — Officials at Dominican Hospital's new mental-health unit have agreed to treat some prisoners from the County Jail.

After weeks of negotiations, Dr. John Gillette of the county mental-health program and Dr. Kenneth Koenig of the privately-run Dominican psychiatric facility arrived at a set of criteria for accepting mentally disturbed prisoners.

The agreement went into effect Monday and laid to rest a growing controversy over treatment of inmates in need of psychiatric counseling.

In the past, jail inmates with mental problems went to the county-run NP ward (neuropsychiatric ward) on Emeline Street. However that facility was closed in favor of the recently built Dominican

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Hospital unit, which officially opened July 18.

The problem of treating inmates had been left unresolved when the county wrote its contract with Dominican's officials. It had been hoped that by the time Dominican's unit was operating a new jail wing would be built. Included in the jail plans is a 14-bed psychiatric unit.

However, as Dominican neared completion of its facility, it became clear that the jail unit was nowhere near ready. Now, authorities are saying that it may be built in 18 months to two years.

The problem didn't become apparent until jail officials tried to transfer mentally disturbed prisoners to Dominican's unit. They found out to their chagrin that inmates were being rejected.

"The new agreement is a definition of our original guidelines," said Dr. Koenig,

director of the Dominican Psychiatric unit.

"We've developed specific criteria under which people would not be treated," he said. These include people charged with serious crimes involving illicit drugs or violence, people with a history of violence toward others and prisoners prone to escape.

Also, any prisoner will be returned to the jail if they're found using illegal drugs, trying to escape or assaulting other patients, said Dr. Koenig.

"We've had clear-cut statements from patients and (psychiatric) practitioners that if we created a jail-like atmosphere here, they would leave or not refer patients to us again," said Dr. Koenig.

"Primarily we're a private facility," said Dr. Koenig. "We're not designed only to service people in the county, but our private patients as well."

Dr. Gillette said, "I believe Dominican

wants to treat prisoners the way others are getting treated." The main stumbling blocks to equal treatment are shackles, jail guards and orange jail jumpsuits.

"They've already accepted a couple of patients in custody," said Dr. Gillette of Dominican's new policy.

But, he added, the violent criminals with mental problems and those charged with heinous crimes (such as murder) will still be sent to state-run facilities like Napa and Atascadero.

While the agreement is designed to alleviate some of the problems faced by jail officials, Dr. Gillette said that many of the problems could be initially resolved if peace officers took disturbed people directly to Dominican to be evaluated. Among these groups of people he includes those who haven't committed crimes, but who appear disturbed.

Most of the prisoners affected by the new policies are those charged with misdemeanor crimes such as trespassing, public disturbance and defrauding an innkeeper, said Dr. Koenig. Their "criminal behavior" oftentimes is more a result of psychiatric problems than a criminal bent.

The agreement will be in effect through April 1985, or until the jail finishes its new wing.