

# Community Hospital at work on intensive care nursery

SANTA CRUZ — At this point it doesn't look like the kind of a place you'd want to put a baby in need of medical attention, but that didn't faze the staff and administration at Community Hospital Monday as they stood in an oversized alley, scissors poised for a ribbon-cutting ceremony to inaugurate the expansion of their Obstetrical Department.

Construction on the new facility began last Thursday and is expected to be completed in 90 days at a cost of approximately \$600,000. The hospital's regular care nursery will grow from 16 to 18 beds and a new unit, a much-touted "level 2," Neonatal Intensive Care Nursery, will be added.

There are three classifications for nurseries. Level 1 is for babies born without complications. Level 2 tends to children born prematurely, without life-threatening complications, but in need of monitoring. Those with such serious problems are treated at level 3 nurseries, such as those at Stanford Hospital.

Santa Cruz County already has two level 2 nurseries — one at Dominican Hospital and one at Watsonville Community Hospital. According to Watsonville Community Hospital Chief Executive Officer Paul Estess, the occupancy rate at its three-year-old facility between July 1985 and June 1986 was 38 percent. Dominican spokesman Ted Benhari puts Dominican's occupancy rate for its six-room facility at "just under 70 percent."

Judging from the figures, says Benhari, "you can conclude from that that there really is no particular need for another level 2 in the area."

Estess agrees, stating that, "There's not a need for another intensive care unit. I think the thing that makes it possible to be good is to have an average volume of work that keeps nurses' skills honed, and physicians' skills honed. So it hurts everyone. (The opening of the new facility) is not doing a great service to the community."

On the other hand, Ann Klein, executive officer at Community Hospital, feels the time is ripe for a new nursery, explaining that "this gives mothers an opportunity to be taken care of on site." Currently, when there are complications, newborns are stabilized and sent to facilities in either San Jose or at Stanford.

Any newborn with level 3 complications born in any Santa Cruz County hospital is sent out of county, but those born with milder complications are able to stay put if they are admitted to Watsonville or Dominican hospitals.

For Dr. Harriet Korakas, a Santa Cruz obstetrician who works out of both Community and Dominican, the new facility is a welcome improvement. "Sometimes our closest choice is Children's Hospital in San Francisco. I hate to think of a baby that needs attention in the summertime when traffic is bumper to bumper on (Highway) 17."

"I don't think it's extra baggage," Korakas continues. "It's upgrading: every hospital should have the latest in what's available to care for the baby. Level 2 is just giving a formal name to a better stage of care in the nursery."

"I can't really say if there's a need," says Benhari over at Dominican, adding, "We're in an era in health care where facilities have been freed from regulations requiring them to get state approval: any hospital can go ahead and offer whatever services they see fit... It's what capitalism is all about."

Until Jan. 1 of this year "there was a state regulation that every time a hospital expanded or added a new service, the state had to validate that need," confirms A.J. Lindeman, chief operations officer at Community Hospital. If the state approves, a Certificate of Need is issued. The plans for Community Hospital's new obstetric unit were in the works over a year ago, according to Klein, and such a certificate was issued, lending the state's approval to the project.

With Community and Dominican each bringing over 1,000 newborns into the world every year; and, according to Lindeman's estimates, an occupancy rate at Community "that's basically 100 percent, there is clearly a need to expand." And, asset or excess, Santa Cruz County can expect to have its third level 2 nursery in full operation within the next three months.