

Supervisors to consider countywide paramedic plan

SANTA CRUZ — Supervisors will be asked Tuesday to take another step in initiating a countywide paramedic program.

Since 1976, according to accounts at the time, various boards of supervisors have discussed the idea of establishing a county-led paramedic program, but to no avail. Now, as the county, medical community, fire departments and ambulance crews move closer to a consensus, it appears that opposition has again arisen.

Currently, only Aptos Fire Department has a paramedic program, which has operated for the past six years as a "pilot

program" with financial support of Dominican Hospital.

Supervisors will be considering a county-led paramedic proposal at 11 a.m. in Room 525 of the Government Center.

Dr. George Wolfe, public health officer for the county, has recommended that Dominican Hospital and Watsonville Community Hospital be designated as base stations. Community Hospital of Santa Cruz has been recommended to run the cardiopulmonary resuscitation program.

Community Hospital officials have protested that the county is being unfair at not choosing their hospital as a base sta-

tion. their hospital. They are also critical of other components of the draft program, including its cost.

"There hasn't been enough discussion of this," said Dr. Alan Buchwald, medical director of Community Hospital's emergency room.

"It's clear this is what the county wants and we support it," he added. However, he said, the public idea of base stations lends itself to the idea of one hospital being better than the other. His staff, he maintained, is "extremely well trained in emergency work."

"Our county's ALS (advanced life sup-

port) program doesn't recognize any hospital as better than another," said Wolfe. "We like to think of it as a team."

According to Wolfe, the county has taken precautions to ensure that no one hospital will get preferential treatment for patient transports.

A base station hospital runs radio communications with the ambulances out in the field. The trained staff can initiate advanced life support techniques, such as administering pain-killing drugs, or defibrillating the heart of a heart attack victim, according to authorities.

Paul Shirley, owner of Santa Cruz Ambulance Co., said the hospitals, the county and the Emergency Medical Care Commission will be among the many who will monitor the patient transports to ensure fairness in the distribution.

The Highway Patrol has worked out three criteria for transporting people via ambulance, according to Shirley.

The criteria is:

- That patients in non-life threatening situations are given a chance to state which hospital they prefer;
- That in life-threatening situations, patients be taken to the closest hospital;
- That if neither of the two situations above exist, then the county and hospitals have agreed for many years to rotate where patients.

Shirley said Santa Cruz Ambulance Co. did a year-long study of which patients go to which hospital in north county. The firm took the first 100 cases for 12 months and tracked the destinations.

According to Shirley, of 1,200 patients who were transported to the emergency rooms, "in the low 60 percentile" went to Dominican, and "in the high 30 percentile" went to Community. He said that corresponds to the figures presented by the hospitals themselves in terms of walk-in patients to the emergency rooms.

The study also said:

- The majority of patients, when asked, requested they go to Dominican over Community, by a margin of 3 to 1.

- The opposite statistics were true when the closest hospital designation was used. By a 2 to 1 margin, Community received the most patients. (Officials at the hospitals and ambulance company said this is because the majority of accidents in summer occur near the beach or in the city of Santa Cruz, where Community is closer.)

- In the last category (rotation), the two hospitals are virtually tied.

Wolfe said, "Everyone's honing in on the base station question, but that shows a little tunnel vision."

The county envisions a program that's three-tiered, with the first priority being that "the citizenry should be trained in CPR," said Wolfe, adding that's where Community Hospital's involvement in the advanced life support system is critical.

Dr. Buchwald of Community Hospital scoffed at that, saying the hospital has been running its own CPR program for years.

The second priority, said Wolfe, is to have basic life support. He called the two north county hospitals "excellent" in

terms of this, noting that both have extremely well-trained staffs.

The third tier is to have paramedics in the field, able to begin advanced life support.

Dr. Buchwald said there is no reason to have two base stations in a county this size. The problem as he sees it is that it will be very expensive, and the county could continue without a paramedic program. Dr. Buchwald said the county could easily operate with a lesser standard.

Shirley said Santa Cruz County is "one of a handful in the state without a paramedic program."