

The Plan to Dismantle County Health

by Bob Johnson

The Santa Cruz County Medical Society's leadership is moving ahead with plans to terminate the publicly controlled health care system.

If the plan is approved by the board of supervisors, the job of running the outpatient clinics and mental health care system will be turned over to an administrative arm of the private medical society.

State and local tax monies would be given to the society's Santa Cruz Foundation for Medical Care in exchange for contractual agreements to provide for public health needs.

The administrative apparatus of the county health services agency (HSA), which runs the public health programs that survived the 1973 closing of county hospital, would be eliminated.

HSA Director George Robertson withheld comment until he sees the plans that would abolish his agency.

Dr. Douglas Liddicoat, husband of Aptos Supervisor Marilyn Liddicoat, suggested last week that the changeover from public to private control of health programs could be accomplished by the end of this year.

Dr. Liddicoat offered that timetable to a meeting of the psychiatrists association last Thursday evening. He and Dr. John J. King, former head of the medical society, were attempting to enlist the energy of local psychiatrists for a team effort to remove health care from public administration.

But many of the psychiatrists were nervous about the suggested speed and had questions about both the administrative feasibility and the quality of care issues raised by a private takeover.

There is a severe shortage of acute care psychiatric beds in the area. The 18 beds at the former county hospital on Emeline Street are the only licensed beds in the county and are often not enough to handle the patient load.

But the overcrowding at county is only the most dramatic dimension of the problem. A serious lack of co-ordination between public and private mental health programs was underlined by last year's grand jury. The association backed off from a definite commitment to join with the medical society's plans and agreed only to explore the possibility of turning the county's intensive care psych ward and mental health clinics over to a private contractor.

This week the medical society agreed to slow down in response to the concerns and tentativeness of local psychiatrists, Edgar Colvin, Executive Director of the Medical Society, has been assigned the task of preparing for administration of public health in the county.

Colvin is a major figure in every step of the process of replacing public health programs with a series of private contracts.

As the executive director of the Medical Society, it is Colvin's job to prepare the plan for discussion and approval by the board of governors. As Executive Director of the Foundation for Medical Care, Colvin will be the top health administrator in the county if that plan is approved by the board of supervisors.

And Colvin, who also is Executive Director of the medical society in his home county of Monterey, is not unfamiliar with the politics of the board of supervisors that has final authority over the matter.

During the recent campaign, Colvin served as executive director of the physicians political action group that donated \$6,000 to the recall cause.

Dr. Liddicoat was also one of the main movers in behind the scenes efforts to gather financial support for the recall from the medical community.

Important segments of the private medical community have long believed the government does a poor job as administrator and regulator of health care programs.

Dr. Liddicoat told the *Independent* the idea of contracting those programs to the private sector is based on the hope the society can find a way to deliver better care for fewer tax dollars. The victory of Jarvin-Gann underlined the need for increased efficiency, Liddicoat said.

His remarks followed the theme of a letter King sent to the supervisors two months ago. King

argued the mental health program, outpatient clinics and perinatal program are all inefficient or poorly administered.

He offered the services of the medical society in seeking a better way to go about the business of public health. And King expressed hope the new board would be more receptive to suggestions from the medical community.

At last week's meeting with the psychiatrists, Dr. Liddicoat explained his speedy timetable by pointing out that current political climate and composition of the board of supervisors make this a ripe time for action.

At least one psychiatrist present came away with the impression Dr. Liddicoat thought he had three votes already sewn up for turning public health over to the medical society.

But Dr. Liddicoat assured the *Independent* that he "does not represent his wife in the matter, no one speaks for her."

Live Oak Supervisor Dan Forbus said he has not been approached to support contracting out the clinics and mental health program. Forbus is confident his three conservative colleagues would not agree to such a plan without mentioning it to him.

And chairperson Cecil Smith said he has not yet seen a concrete proposal on the question and will not make up his mind until such a plan is presented. Smith did say he would be receptive to any plan presented.

Local physician Allan Bayer has outlined a program he believes would overcome those problems.

Bayer proposes the creation of a private non-profit system of mental health care for the county. The development of a broad range of educational, vocational and social support services is one of the key elements in that plan.

Bayer believes one of the major shortcomings of current mental health treatment in the county is a failure to make use of a broad range of community resources in a co-ordinated program.

Another element of the proposal calls for a board of directors chosen from among the neighborhoods of the county and relatives of the mentally ill.

Bayer discussed his proposal last month with King, Dr. Liddicoat and administrators from Dominican and Community Hospitals. Since then, he has presented the plan to the Friends and Relatives of the Mentally Disturbed and enlisted the interest of members of the county Mental Health Advisory Board.

But that plan is apparently no longer at the forefront for the medical society, which looks to its Foundation for Medical Care as the administrative agency.

Colvin has referred to plans for private control of the clinics as phase two of a process that began with the 1973 decision to close the county hospital.

That decision remains controversial, with some health care critics believing it resulted in more money for the private sector than care for the indigent. □

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