

Dominican Hospital takes on 'Doc in the box'

By PAUL BEATTY
Sentinel Staff Writer

SANTA CRUZ — Dominican Hospital cut its emergency room charges by 10 to 20 percent this week as it swung into active competition with a "doc in the box" emergency care center that opened on Ocean Street last December.

Calling it one of "these doc-in-the-boxes," Dominican President Sister Josephine announced in a memo to staff that their standard fee would be \$39 for minor injuries and illnesses, and there would be a discount for cash.

The "doc in the box" is Dr. Robert Morris who in

December opened his Emergency Medical Center to treat drop-in urgency cases.

His rates were only about 40-50 percent of Dominican's emergency room rates for the same sore throats, cuts, bruises and asthma attacks.

Business is good, with as many as 38 patients on one good day.

Dominican's emergency room business in the same time dropped three percent, announced its director, Wayne Boss.

Meanwhile, Community Hospital of Santa Cruz says it's not interested in getting into the competition for minor medical treatment in its emergency room.

Community Hospital's Executive Director Jean Adams says from his hospital's perspective "it's best for the emergency room to confine itself to emergency treatment.

"For colds, sore throats and minor injuries, the best delivery system is the family doctor and in that delivery, the urgency center (such as Dr. Morris's) fills an important niche."

Morris is angry with Dominican and Boss for sending out a slick brochure to county residents announcing that it is "revolutionizing emergency care in Santa Cruz County" by cutting rates and offering two doctors on service during peak hours and the option for patients to call their own

doctor.

Dominican's mail-out also encourages people with "minor emergency problem(s) to come to Dominican for fast, caring service."

Morris complains the hospital is exercising too much control over the practice of medicine — taking control away from physicians.

He says, "I'm surprised the physicians aren't getting madder than hell about this."

Boss says, "The feedback I'm getting is showing that physicians aren't reacting that way at all." He says, "We

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are giving everyone the option of calling his or her own physician. I think Dr. Morris's reaction is a bit of sour grapes."

Morris says that even with the fee cut by the area's largest hospital, his services are far less expensive. He says they will range from 30-40 percent and says that in the case of a tetanus shot, he'll do it for \$32 compared to \$52 at the hospital.

Boss argues that the hospital still has the backup of a full staff and further notes that Morris won't take Medical and indigent patients.

Morris accepts only cash, credit cards or workers compensation to keep his billing costs down.

Now, Dominican is going to give a discount for those patients who pay cash.

Boss says that the hospital has decided to offer a service closer to that of the free-standing clinic run by Dr. Morris simply because the medical care services are having to get more competitive.

Hospitals have faced the loss of government insurance money because hospitals must contract with the government on an individual basis. Add to that that patients are

shopping around more, "medicine has had to become competitive."

Dr. Morris says the competition is somewhat unfair, pointing out that Dominican can afford a major mailing, partly because it can use its non-profit mailing privilege.

Boss says that is equalized by the beating that Dominican takes on charity cases and cuts in government insurance patients.

Sister Josephine says that not only has Dr. Morris opened a "doc in the box," but that Watsonville Community Hospital Emergency Department is planning to open one at 6800 Soquel Drive and that could further take away Dominican's patients.

In its advertisement to compete with Dr. Morris, Dominican goes so far as to note: "Dominican is conveniently located immediately accessible from Highway 1; no wasted time at busy city intersections."

Dr. Morris' center sits just west of the Ocean and Water street intersection.

Boss and Morris agree that it's the public that is benefiting from the competition, but disagree on who should get the credit.

"I started the revolution," Morris says.

Boss will only admit that Morris brought it to Santa Cruz, but it is the public that started it.

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