

Argus-Courier – Editorial

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## **CONFLICT HURTING HEALTH CARE**

### **DOCTORS AND ST. JOSEPH OFFICIALS MUST LEARN TO WORK TOGETHER**

With the many complex challenges facing the local health care system, effective communication and collaboration are essential to ensuring that the limited resources available are maximized in order to serve a community that expects and deserves the best from its health care providers.

Unfortunately, good communication and productive collaboration are falling fast in the deepening political chasm between Petaluma physicians and the St. Joseph Health System, which operates Petaluma Valley Hospital.

It doesn't help that the local doctors group, the South Sonoma County Medical Group is charging off on its own to try and solve the hugely challenging problem of recruiting and retaining good physicians. This is an ongoing problem that has bedeviled both St. Joseph and the Petaluma Health Care District, whose publicly elected board of directors oversees health care in Petaluma.

Since the physician group was formed nearly two years ago, the doctors have been rightfully pushing for a greater role in recruiting, hiring and acclimating new physicians to the community. The recruitment effort was heretofore the responsibility of the health care district and St. Joseph, and has not been without some major setbacks. Aside from not delivering on the expected results, the district found itself in the embarrassing situation of losing money last year when newly recruited doctors began defaulting on loans.

Now the doctors group is insisting that they, and only they, can develop an effective alternative plan to recruit and retain physicians and craft a more diverse and effective health care system in Petaluma. Presenting only the vaguest of business plans, the group

last week requested \$120,000 of public money to carry out their goals. The district board properly refused the request, requiring that a more detailed plan be prepared to ensure that public funds are spent wisely.

The physician group's recently announced plans to establish their own outpatient surgery center has also not helped matters, since such a center could very well threaten the very survival of Petaluma Valley Hospital.

The doctors claim the surgery center would provide a big boost to local health care and help to recruit new surgeons and specialists. But does the south county area have enough residents to support both a full-service hospital and a surgery center? District officials are understandably concerned about the economic risks of establishing a surgery center that could wind up hurting both the physicians and the hospital. The surgery center would be more likely to treat the better-insured and healthier patients, leaving the hospital to care for patients who are under-insured and who have more serious health issues.

Is this really in the public's best interest?

The political jockeying, ill will, lack of trust, and profound failure by the physicians and St. Joseph's to properly communicate and collaborate with one another is making matters worse for a health care system already on the ropes.

It's the job of the locally elected members of the Petaluma Health Care District, primarily, to put an end to this escalating conflict by insisting that the two groups work together. If necessary, the district should hire a mediator skilled at bringing the physicians and St. Joseph officials together to restore a sense of trust that is vital to ensuring that high quality, affordable and convenient health-care services are preserved in the south county.