

Press Democrat – Tug of War

Article published - Oct 7, 2007

TUG OF WAR PETALUMA STRUGGLE SHOWCASES WHAT THREATENS COMMUNITY HOSPITALS

The plight of local hospitals is evident in a budding contest of patient tug of war emerging between a group of Petaluma physicians and Petaluma Valley Hospital.

The problem: Doctors at the two-year-old Sonoma County Medical Group are frustrated with having to refer patients to Marin County and Santa Rosa for tests and procedures that used to be performed -- at more affordable prices -- in Petaluma.

The proposed solution: The doctors want to establish an outpatient surgery center where these procedures would be performed at much less cost than at Petaluma Valley Hospital.

The problem for the hospital: Such a surgery clinic would likely siphon patients from Petaluma Valley Hospital creating more financial challenges for it and the Petaluma Health Care District. Hospital officials say they need to charge higher prices for certain procedures to maintain a full-service community-based hospital.

The community dilemma: This is not an isolated case. Many hospitals face similar challenges from the opening of outpatient clinics that threaten to take the cream of the crop -- the higher-paying patients that help keep hospitals afloat. For example, Sutter Health Care has plans to close its Santa Rosa hospital while it has also announced intentions to open an outpatient facility near the Wells Fargo Center for the Performing Arts. A major question is whether this would help fill the gap in health care created by the closure of Sutter or make things more difficult for Memorial Hospital which will be having to pick up the bulk of the community's acute care needs.

The long-term threat: What will happen if Sonoma County has plenty of out-patient facilities but has no full-service community-based hospitals to take care of emergency and critical care patients?

The solution: In the long-term, the fix needs to come from elected officials in Washington in the form of an overhaul of the current health care system. Without health care reform, doctors and hospitals are left to squabble over crumbs, making decisions that may be in the

best short-term interests of patients but not in the long-term interests of the community.

The near-term solution is for officials at the Petaluma Health Care District and doctors at Sonoma County Medical Group and others to negotiate a pricing structure that won't force patients to go out of the district for treatment -- and won't result in the opening of facilities that may undermine the hospital.

Until Congress gets its act together and agrees on a reasonable reform package, local health care providers are left to make the best of a broken system.

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