

Health chiefs see improved relations between doctors, St. Joseph

By DAN JOHNSON
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While differences exist between some local physicians wanting to establish a new surgery center and other members of the health-care community, three local leaders emphasize that overall, relations between physicians and the St. Joseph Health System of Sonoma County have been improving.

"During the past couple of years, there has been considerable conversation and negotiation between Petaluma physicians and St. Joseph on multiple issues. This has taken some time, and some physicians have been frustrated by the process, but a good deal of progress has been made," said Daymon Doss, CEO of the Petaluma Health Care District.

These changes include St. Joseph's additional investment of more than \$2 million each year in physician pay for emergency room calls, epidural services for women and a hospitalist (in-patient physician) program, among other things.

"These are significant changes," Doss said.

"St. Joseph has come a long way since Jim Suver (the vice president of operations and chief administrator at PVH) and (CEO) George Perez have come into the picture," said Bob Hill, president of the health care district's board of directors. "Unfortunately, some doctors aren't familiar with all the processes that need to be followed to make improvements, and with the chain of command that is involved."

Suver also feels that major progress has been made, while acknowledging that some physicians remain upset over how previous issues were handled by St. Joseph administrators.

"A few people certainly want to re-visit the past, but things are moving in a good direction. We have positive relations with our physicians, and will continue to move forward with them," he said.

Several physicians forged a close relationship with Suver's predecessor, Wayne Fairchild, and were upset with his controversial departure last year.

"But Jim also has done a lot to create an atmosphere of openness at the hospital, and has spent considerable time talking with physicians," Doss said.

Dr. Bob Ostroff, a retired physician who serves as president of the South Sonoma County Medical Group, feels that relations between some physicians and St. Joseph administrators remain strained, however.

"We're not having good relations now," he said. "We pushed St. Joseph hard for eight years to get epidural services at Petaluma Valley Hospital. This is way too long to implement a type of care that is standard at similar hospitals, and has resulted in substantial patient losses not only for obstetricians and pediatricians, but other types of physicians, as well.

"And we're still fighting to get a full-time pulmonologist in Petaluma. We discuss this with St. Joseph all the time, but it's not happening."

Suver countered that although a full-time pulmonologist is not at the hospital, a pulmonologist is available whenever needed, and could be more available if this becomes necessary.

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