

Trauma notice extended

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Despite recent hires, SW Florida center not ready to rescind closure

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Despite the hiring of two neurosurgeons and the promise of a third, officials running Southwest Florida's only **trauma center** aren't ready to take back their state notice to close.

The Lee Memorial Health System, which operates the **trauma center** at a loss of about \$10 million a year, was forced to send the state a six-month trauma closure notice in January after two neurosurgeons left, leaving only two others to cover the busy center 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Since then, the hospital system has hired two more neurosurgeons - one to start this month and another in January - with a verbal promise from a third to start July 2005.

But until those doctors are settled in, trauma officials have elected to extend their notice to terminate trauma services to Dec. 15, rather than rescind it.

"We are just getting crushed by the volume," trauma director Dr. Andrew Mikulaschek said. "Quite frankly, if any of our neurosurgeons could not continue to perform their neurosurgery obligations to trauma patients, we would most likely be unable to maintain our patient care responsibilities" as required by the state.

Volume, he said, has climbed 13 percent this year so far.

From April 1 through June 30 last year, the **trauma center** fielded 241 trauma alerts, or people with life-threatening injuries such as from auto accidents and gunshots.

During the same period this year, the number of trauma patients jumped to 337.

This year, the **trauma center** is on track to see up to 1,200 patients - up from 1,000 last year and 800 in 2002 - which is why the center's sixth trauma surgeon starts next month, Mikulaschek said.

"I know I sound like a broken record, but the numbers don't stop," he said. "They just keep going up and up and up."

In June, Lee Memorial President Jim Nathan informed the state that failed efforts to fund trauma centers this year, as well as establish a long-term funding source, makes hiring physicians to Lee County more difficult.

Nathan said he hopes Lee Memorial can resolve the problem in the next six to 12 months.

"We pledge to maintain our focus on trying to stabilize our physician coverage," he wrote to William Tynan, state director of Emergency Medical Operations.

"Unfortunately, the lack of a clear long-term funding source and the state's decision to not provide additional trauma funding this year provide conflicting signals to existing and prospective physicians we depend on to care for these complex patients."

Lee Memorial also extended its contract through the end of the year with a part-time neurosurgeon from Broward County, who drives over to help out twice a month.

Meanwhile, Lee Memorial officials say, the trauma load continues to sap the system's resources, as sicker patients demand more and expensive resources, but do little to increase the bottom line.

Historically, patients who use trauma services disproportionately have no insurance. So far this year, 27 percent of trauma patients are uninsured, said John Wiest, Lee Memorial's chief financial officer.

Yet a trauma patient can rack up costs ranging from \$20,000 to \$40,000 and beyond, officials said.

On-call trauma specialists provide more than \$3 million in unpaid services each year to uninsured patients, adding to the losses Lee Memorial sustains as it funds some of that gap in order to hold on to and attract physicians.

"We continue to see a lot more severe patients with the reimbursement basically staying the same," Wiest said. "We have certain costs that are fixed, but as our volume continues to grow, we'll see our losses grow."