

# Hospital defends answer to state query

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Hackensack University Medical Center avoided a key question — Did anyone die? — when it submitted its answers to the state health department's questions regarding the proposed reopening of Pascack Valley Hospital in Westwood.

Staff at the Department of Health and Senior Services had asked the medical center if anyone died as a result of the increased travel time to other emergency rooms after Pascack's closure in 2007.

"Document how many patients have expired," said Question 11.

HUMC substituted that question with: "Do you have any studies to support your claim that minutes make the difference?"

A hospital spokeswoman said the question was changed because HUMC would not know what happened to patients taken to other hospitals. Instead, they tried to respond to the reviewer's intentions in asking the question.

The questions and responses are part of a health department review of HUMC's proposal to open a 128-bed community hospital in Westwood. Once all the questions have been answered, the application will be considered by the State Health Planning Board and then the state health commissioner. A decision is expected in November.

The responses were received Friday and "are still under review," said Donna Leusner, a health department spokeswoman.

If the application is approved, HUMC officials say they will be ready to open the new facility — called Hackensack University Medical Center North — at the end of next year

The Valley Hospital in Ridgewood and Englewood Hospital and Medical Center both oppose HUMC's plan, but their legal objections have failed. They also intend to make their opposition known to the health department. Englewood has a meeting scheduled with the department next week, its spokeswoman said.

Asked about the question's revision, HUMC vice president Thomas Kruse said in an e-mail that medical center officials were unable to answer the question because they have no data about people who suffered health emergencies but did not end up at HUMC.

"Hospitals in New Jersey do not have access to any information about outcomes of individual patients transported from the field" to other hospitals, he said. "As a result, we cannot respond to the question as stated."

Instead, they responded "to the intent of the question," he said, "which is to determine how the absence of a hospital in Westwood had directly impacted lives."

In that vein, HUMC cited a 1999 study about the relationship between asthma deaths and travel time to a hospital. It was conducted by researchers examining Britain's national health system in rural East Anglia, where hospitals are in short supply. It found that the death rate from asthma

increased by 7 percent for every 10 extra minutes of travel time.

Death from asthma is relatively uncommon in New Jersey, according to the state Health Department, accounting for 12.5 deaths per million people. If the study's conclusion were applied here, it would add less than one additional death per million population for each additional 10 minutes of travel.

Traffic studies commissioned by the medical center for its application show that going to The Valley Hospital's emergency room adds 8.8 minutes of travel time during peak hours, on average.

HUMC's submission also cited testimony from a local mother as an example "of the potential toll on human life of lack of speedy access to a hospital." Lisa Babin spoke at a 2009 public hearing in favor of the hospital reopening, and referred to the emergency cesarean section she had when Pascack was still open. "My neighbors deserve that same chance," she said at that time.

Other comments came from local ambulance corps members, who said it takes them longer to make emergency runs and how that can result in a longer response times to later calls.

In a separate question, the state noted that "it appears that there is more than an adequate number of beds" in the region and provided statistics about the occupancy rate at hospitals. "Why do you believe that consumer needs ... are not being adequately met?" they asked.

HUMC challenged the state's statistics, saying they do not include "observation beds," in which patients are observed as outpatients without being officially admitted to the hospital. "It is difficult to obtain local data on current hospital observation rates," the medical center's response said, but its own experience was that more than 12 percent of its beds are used for observation.

If that rate were applied to other hospitals, the county occupancy rate would increase to 93.8 percent, Hackensack said, justifying the need for additional beds. Moreover, seasonal flu outbreaks and the need for "surge capacity" to deal with mass casualty situations also support the case for a new hospital, it said.

In response to another question, HUMC officials said their plans for a cardiac catheterization lab at the new hospital are justified because of the anticipated increase in heart disease as the population ages. The lab would take care of low-risk patients currently seen at HUMC, the response said, and not take patients away from Valley or Englewood.

HUMC provided information about the 33,800 patients treated from October 2008 through August in its satellite emergency department in Westwood. Slightly more than two-thirds were from the Pascack Valley and Northern Valley towns that comprise the "core service" area. Seven percent were admitted to full-service hospitals.

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