

Hospitals have battled for quarter century

Saturday, December 3, 2011

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The bruising battle over the reopening of Pascack Valley Hospital pulled the curtain back on the high stakes business of hospitals. But it wasn't the first time that Bergen County's hospitals duked it out with lawsuits, rallies, lobbyists and public relations campaigns.

Twenty-five years ago, Hackensack University Medical Center received the first license in the county to perform open-heart surgery, a lucrative specialty that helped slow the flow of patients leaving the suburbs for medical care in New York City and started Hackensack's rise to dominance among local hospitals.

When The Valley Hospital in Ridgewood received permission for a second program two years later, after a personal phone call by then-state Attorney General Carey Edwards to the state health commissioner, the hospital wars were on.

Common growth

Hackensack argued it would harm its program by stealing patients away. It sued, along with Englewood Hospital and Medical Center — which wanted its own open-heart surgery program — and two hospitals in Passaic County. Heart patients rallied in Ridgewood and two successive state health commissioners navigated a zigzagging path through the competing claims.

Valley ultimately kept its program, but the rivalry between Hackensack and Valley was under way.

Last year, within months of each other, each hospital acquired multimillion-dollar biplane angiography systems, which allow three-dimensional imaging during surgery in the head and neck. Each has moved boldly into cancer and cardiovascular services, the growth areas in hospital care.

Both hospitals are hampered by landlocked locations, Valley in the suburban grid of one-family homes, and Hackensack on its sloping city site.

But while Valley was defeated in its attempt to build in Ridgewood, Hackensack now has a 20 acre campus in Westwood that offers room for expansion.

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