

Hospital oversupply continues

By Mark Hoerth

In its two years of existence, the Nebraska certificate of need law has done little to improve one of the largest hospital oversupply problems in the nation.

Calling statewide bed oversupply "gross waste," Kenneth Diamond, Director of the State Health Planning and Development Agency, said Nebraska has more hospital beds per thousand population than most of its neighboring states, and more than 40 percent of them are empty on any given day.

This oversupply, Diamond said, has contributed to the 305 percent increase in personal health expenses among Nebraskans since 1966.

The Nebraska certificate of need law was passed in 1979 as the state's first and only means of controlling hospital growth. It was aimed to end spiraling duplication of medical services by requiring state review of any new health care service that costs the provider more than \$100,000.

In the past, "competition between Nebraska's hospitals to be the biggest hospital with the best equipment," caused a critical oversupply of beds and medical services, said Sen. Don Wesley of Lincoln, vice chairman of the Legislature's Public Health and Welfare Committee.

But the law's sponsor two years ago, Sen. Sam Cullum of Hemingford, chairman of the Health Committee, today believes the "law has not been particularly effective and should be abolished."

Causes cost problem

Hospital bed oversupply is still a "definite cost problem, efficiency problem, and effectiveness problem," in Lincoln, said Richard Hayden, administrator of Lincoln General Hospital.

Because the cost of "care delivered to each of us would be less," Hayden called for better health planning in the future and elimination of unnecessary beds and services in the Lincoln area.

Hayden, who came to Lincoln General a year ago, said that among the three city hospitals, there are 100 excess hospital beds. In addition, each hospital is handling a "less than appropriate amount of volume."

Lack of need has kept the top two floors of Lincoln General, room for 176 beds, closed. If this total capacity is added, the excess for the three hospitals climbs to 276 beds. Those beds could be available with little time or expense, Hayden said.

Despite this excess, Lincoln General and the other Lincoln hospitals compare favorably with minimum standards of occupied beds as determined by the State Health Department.

In its Five Year Facilities Plan, the department established that the average occupancy for Southeast Nebraska hospitals should be at least 80 percent.

Lincoln hospitals' occupancy

Based on a total of 245 beds, Lincoln General records an average daily occupancy of 76 percents.

Of the 208 beds in use at St. Elizabeth Community Health Center, 74.8 percent of them are occupied on any given day.

At Bryan Memorial Hospital, 80.6 percent of the 340 available beds are occupied daily.

According to the State Facilities Plan, these rates make southeast Nebraska the region of second highest occupancy in the state. However, Hayden sees a need to bring "occupancy higher because that means more efficiency and less cost unit."

Because the cost to a hospital of keeping an empty bed is three-fourths of the cost of a full bed, economics create "a strong tendency to fill those empty beds," Diamond said.

"Oversupply of health care creates its own demand." People are hospitalized at a much higher rate in certain parts of the state. These areas "correlate directly to where there is this kind of oversupply," Diamond said.

Services overlap

A desire on the part of every hospital to be full service also causes an overlap in the types of services Lincoln hospitals provide.

Specifically, the needs of Lincoln could be fulfilled by two hospital pediatrics departments, but there are three presently in operation, Hayden said.

Lincoln General and Bryan maintain psychiatric wards, and neither is running at ideal capacity, Hayden said.

All three hospitals have obstetrics departments, but the need could be filled with just one department, Hayden said.

Besides the "economic advantages to close these unnecessary facilities," Hayden said, the quality of care would be improved if these areas were combined.

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Norden Dam project is topic of Niobrara River symposium

A coalition of conservation organizations have organized a Niobrara River Symposium to be in Lincoln May 16.

Primary purpose of the symposium is to cast additional light on all sides of the controversy surrounding the proposed O'Neill Unit (Norden Dam) and on various alternatives.

One alternative includes requests by landowners along the river to have portions designated a national scenic river while still protecting their agricultural interests.

Another purpose of the conference will be to highlight the outstanding

natural aspects of the Niobrara Valley as a unique region in the Great Plains.

Speakers will focus on existing plant and animal communities found along the river and adjoining canyons, recent paleontological discoveries, recreational values of the area and how to protect resources.

The symposium is being co-sponsored by the Audubon Society, the Save the Niobrara River Association, the Nebraska Wildlife Federation, the Nebraska chapter of the Sierra Club, the Izaak Walton League, Wildlife Management Institute, National Parks and Conservation Association, the Nebraska Tax Limit Coalition and other groups.

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