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## Hospitals, physicians file suit

By **WHITNEY PIPKIN** Staff Writer

The ongoing battle between United General Hospital and Skagit Valley Hospital has escalated into the courtroom, with one hospital suing the other and a group of physicians suing United General for revoking their privileges without cause.

The 36 physicians whose privileges to operate at United General Hospital were revoked last month filed a lawsuit Monday against Public Hospital District 304 in Skagit County Superior Court. United General Hospital also has filed a lawsuit against Skagit Valley Hospital for operating a Skagit Regional Clinic within its district boundaries in Sedro-Woolley.

United General's lawsuit was filed April 29, the day after its board voted to revoke the privileges of the 36 doctors who had become employees of Skagit Valley Hospital through its merger with Skagit Valley Medical Center, now Skagit Regional Clinics.

The physicians also filed a motion asking a judge to halt the termination of their privileges, which are set to expire on May 31, until after the lawsuit is decided.

The motion says the injunction is necessary "to prevent irreparable harm that will occur to the quality of medical care in this community" if the privileges are ended. The loss of privileges would prevent the doctors from continuing to care for their patients should they be admitted to United General.

The motion is scheduled to be heard May 27, according to Michael C. Subit, the Seattle attorney that Skagit Valley Hospital has hired to represent the 36 physicians.

"This is not about the doctors. The doctors are going to be fine. This is about their concern that United General has made it illegal to treat their own patients," Subit said.

He said the lawsuit filed by the physicians is completely separate from legal action United General has taken against Skagit Valley Hospital and would have been filed either way.

Skagit Valley CEO Gregg Davidson issued a statement Monday expressing disappointment that the differences between the two hospitals had come to this.

"Despite good faith efforts over the past two years by Skagit Valley Hospital to identify opportunities to work together with District 304, we have not been successful and they have turned it into litigation," Davidson said in the statement.

United General CEO Greg Reed was not available for comment Monday evening.

United General's complaint asks the judge to prohibit Skagit Valley Hospital from operating the clinic, employing physicians and other employees or purchasing property within the boundaries of United General's hospital district.

The complaint states that Skagit Valley has employed six doctors as well as a pharmacist, nurse and optometrist and has entered into an agreement to purchase Unit 2 in The Pavilion medical offices located next to the hospital without its permission.

The document cites the state law pertaining to public hospital districts and their boundaries. United General has used an attorney general's written opinion based on the law to support its position that it can refuse other public hospital districts' requests to operate within its boundaries.

Skagit Valley has not yet filed its response to the lawsuit, though the hospital has retained legal counsel on the matter, said hospital spokeswoman Kari Ranten.

Only six or seven of the 36 physicians whose privileges have been revoked by United General regularly operated there. The rest work at other Skagit Regional Clinics in the area.

Twelve of the physicians are listed as main plaintiffs in the lawsuit against United General. Their complaint cites a state law that requires medical staff privilege decisions to be based on competence and professional conduct, not the physicians' employment by another hospital.

A statement from United General about its action to revoke privileges said the decision "in no way reflects on the health care providers' skills and abilities." It says United General tried to hire the physicians to its own facility before making the decision.

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