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Privileges pulled for doctors at S-W hospital

United General board removes privileges of 36 physicians employed by Skagit Valley Hospital; doctors worry about impact on patient care

By WHITNEY PIPKIN Staff Writer

Some of the 36 physicians who will have their privileges to operate at United General Hospital revoked at the end of May say they fear the decision made by the hospital board Thursday will cause patient care in Sedro-Woolley to suffer, at least in the short term.

The board for United General's Hospital District 304 voted Thursday morning to rescind the medical staff privileges of 36 health care providers employed at Skagit Regional Clinic facilities in the area.

The providers became employees of Skagit Valley Hospital through a merger with Skagit Valley Medical Center, now Skagit Regional Clinics, last July. Only seven of the providers affected by the change worked regularly with patients at United General.

Two surgeons and four internal medicine physicians located at the Skagit Regional Clinic in Sedro-Woolley worked especially close with the hospital next door.

But the two surgeons resigned their privileges at United General at a board meeting in March after one of them was given a 90-day expiration date for hospital privileges. They have since been operating at Skagit Valley Hospital.

The other four doctors at the clinic, along with a few from other clinics, volunteered to change their status on United General's medical staff from active to courtesy to symbolize their support for the surgeons.

The scaling back of some providers' privileges was United General's first step to make good on a resolution the board made in May 2010 to deny Skagit Valley Hospital's request for permission to operate the Sedro-Woolley clinic within the boundaries of Hospital District 304.

The board has said it believes those physicians, as employees of another hospital, would send and have been sending referrals to their employer instead of to the hospital next door.

United General CEO Greg Reed said his hospital saw referrals from the clinic decline by 26 percent from 2009 to 2010 while referrals from other doctors declined by less than 5 percent due to the recession.

But physicians at the clinic as well as officials from Skagit Valley Hospital have said they have

not redirected referrals to Mount Vernon or directed employees to do so.

"The irony in this is the actions United General is taking is almost creating a self-fulfilling prophecy," said Gregg Davidson, CEO of Skagit Valley Hospital. "If the doctors can't work at United, that limits their options on how they care for their patients."

A change in care?

The change in privileges means doctors at Skagit Regional Clinic can no longer continue to care for their patients once they're admitted to United General. The patients will be passed on to one of two hospitalists hired by United General to provide only in-hospital care. In the past, their primary care physician could continue to care for them there.

The clinic in Sedro-Woolley serves more than 10,000 patients and 7,600 households in the region, a statement from Skagit Valley Hospital said.

United's Reed said the doctors with reduced privileges will still be able to order services at the hospital such as X-rays or lab tests for their patients.

He said patients also will retain their ability to choose where they get those services, much like they can choose where to fill prescriptions issued by a doctor.

Tami Gilbert, a nurse at United General and patient of the Skagit Regional Clinic in Sedro-Woolley, said she isn't sure the board's decision is in the best interest of local residents. She said she and her husband have continued to be referred to United General, not Skagit Valley, for services since the clinic's merger, especially since her husband receives lab tests and infusions frequently for Crohn's disease.

She's concerned they might have to go to Mount Vernon to continue receiving the same care.

"I'm a nurse at United, so I feel torn," she said. "I definitely want this place to do well. I'm just really frustrated. I think turning away patients, especially with insurance, at this time isn't the right thing to do."

As a tax-paying resident of Sedro-Woolley, Gilbert said she'd prefer to see her own doctor should she be admitted to United General Hospital.

When asked about the impact on patient care, Reed said patients might have to travel if they want to see their own doctor in a hospital.

"But before, they were traveling more anyway because there was a decline in the use of our services, which would indicate patients being sent to Mount Vernon or elsewhere for services," he said.

Dr. Teackle Martin, who has been practicing internal medicine at the Sedro-Woolley clinic for 35 years, said he's concerned about how the change will affect his patients, many of whom are elderly and could have difficulty traveling to Mount Vernon or Bellingham for services.

"My story is one of concern for the patients, that they're denying us privileges to practice in the hospital to take care of our patients in United General," he said. "It's really unfortunate for the

patients on the north side of the river.”

Recruiting like crazy

United General has been rushing to add to its staff physicians who can provide the same services that were once provided by Skagit Regional Clinics employees.

The hospital has hired two general surgeons who Reed said could start seeing patients as early as May 9. United also has hired a family medicine doctor who will start in an office across the street from the hospital in mid-May and a hospitalist who is the second full-time physician in United’s hospitalist program started a year ago.

The hospital also is looking to hire two to three additional primary care physicians. Other services that were provided by Skagit Regional Clinics doctors, such as cardiology, could be provided by physicians from PeaceHealth St. Joseph Medical Center in Bellingham. Reed said discussions to that end are being finalized.

Dr. Jeffrey Feld used to provide those services for patients at United General as a cardiologist employed by Skagit Regional Clinics.

He said even if the hospital is able to recruit a PeaceHealth cardiologist to set up shop in Sedro-Woolley, at this point “it’s a hope, not a reality.”

“To disrupt existing practices in the hope that they’ll be able to bring somebody to come and stay and there reliably... whether it becomes real, time will tell,” he said.

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