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Surgeons bow out of United General; other physicians reducing commitment

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For now, United General Hospital has no surgeons as a power struggle between the Sedro-Woolley hospital and Skagit Valley Hospital in Mount Vernon resulted in a shake-up among doctors at Skagit Regional Clinic in Sedro-Woolley this week.

Skagit Regional Clinic has been owned by Skagit Valley Hospital since a July 2010 merger. United General's board of directors made it clear before the merger that they would not give their neighboring hospital district permission to operate a clinic within their boundaries, and they've slowly been making good on that promise.

In January, the board limited the "privileges to practice" of two general surgeons at United General from the customary two years to just 90 days, with no guarantee of renewing them.

But the surgeons, Dr. Michael Erie and Dr. Karen Hunter, pre-empted the board's decision by resigning their privileges Thursday, about a month before they were scheduled to expire.

"They made the decision for us," United General CEO Greg Reed said after the board accepted the surgeons' resignations Thursday morning.

The pair of surgeons are in the process of moving to Skagit Regional Clinic in Mount Vernon, Skagit Valley Hospital officials said. They'll soon see patients there and are being worked into the surgery schedule at Skagit Valley Hospital.

As a show of support for the two surgeons, four internal medicine physicians at the clinic requested to be changed from active to courtesy status on United General's staff, which essentially reduces their commitment to the hospital. They'll continue to see patients as usual at the clinic in Sedro-Woolley. Five other internal medicine doctors at Skagit Regional Clinic in Mount Vernon requested the change to courtesy status, as well.

Skagit Regional Clinic in Sedro-Woolley handed out letters to patients who asked about its status Thursday, assuring them the clinic is still running despite the staff changes.

In addition, four other general surgeons who worked on-call for United General and other hospitals in the region opted to terminate their privileges to practice at the Sedro-Woolley hospital, leaving the hospital with no inhouse surgeons until new ones can be hired.

United General is well on its way to hiring two new surgeons as hospital employees and has been courting candidates with "first-class" receptions in recent weeks, board Chairman Chuck Ruhl said

Thursday.

Reed said patients requiring surgical intervention in the meantime will be transferred to St. Joseph Hospital in Bellingham.

"We've been looking for general surgeons for the last two years because our needs in the community indicated we have a need," Reed said.

Need for surgeons

United General is working to recruit those surgeons as soon as possible, especially since surgery is one of the main revenue generators at the facility.

"A little bit of surgery goes a long way in making us profitable. When we don't have that, we suffer," Michael Bonthuis, chief financial officer at United General, said during a presentation to the board Thursday.

Surgeons Hunter and Erie performed the majority of their operations at United General in the past as independent practitioners at Skagit Valley Medical Center, which is now Skagit Regional Clinics.

After practicing medicine in Sedro-Woolley for 22 years, Erie is very much ingrained in the local community, said Dr. Edwin Stickle, who heads the Unified Medical Staff of Skagit Valley, a group of doctors who work for the hospitals and serve as a medical advisory board.

"If you pick someone out of the phone book, he's operated on them, their family member or someone they know," Stickle said of Erie. "He's devoted his whole career to this hospital."

Stickle said many of the other doctors who resigned their privileges or changed status did so in support of Erie, who was unavailable for comment.

Hunter, the other surgeon involved in the shuffle, has accepted a position at Providence Regional Medical Center in Everett. She will start there in early May.

Skagit Valley's CEO Gregg Davidson said that hospital is in the process of hiring at least one general surgeon to replace Hunter and assessing a possible need for more.

The two surgeons became employees of Skagit Valley Hospital when it merged with the clinics in July 2010, which raised concerns with United General's board that the physicians' loyalties — and referrals — would go to a different hospital district.

United General operates in Public Hospital District No. 304, which includes Sedro-Woolley, Burlington and a number of communities from Samish Island to Rockport. The Skagit Regional Clinic in Sedro-Woolley is located in The Pavilion medical building next to United General.

Skagit Valley Hospital's District No. 1 serves Mount Vernon and surrounding areas and has Skagit Regional Clinic facilities in Skagit, Island and Snohomish counties.

Those clinics are located within five different hospital districts, said Ben Lindekugel, director of member services for the Association of Washington Public Hospital Districts. He said the hospital

has not had issues operating facilities in any district, except for District 304.

Clinic questions

United General's board decided in May 2010 that it would not give Skagit Valley Hospital permission to operate a clinic within District 304. The board had determined that another public hospital could not operate within its district without permission. This was based on a 1988 opinion from the state Attorney General, which stemmed from the law establishing public hospital districts.

The board has said it believes the physicians employed by Skagit Valley Hospital would refer patients to their new employer instead of United General for additional services.

"This loss of revenue represents a drain on our hospital district that is unacceptable," the board said in a May 2010 statement.

A letter given to patients at Skagit Regional Clinic in Sedro-Woolley this week attempted to counter perceptions that the clinic would close or only refer patients to Skagit Valley Hospital.

"We look forward to continuing to serve the needs of our patients here. ... Though our physicians are employed by Skagit Valley Hospital, they will continue to refer you to the appropriate health services and locations based on your unique needs, as they always have," said the letter, signed by Jane Root, the Clinics' chief administrative officer.

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