

Dental clinic shuts at S.J. hospital

Former staff fear for low-income, welfare patients

By **Joe Goldeen**

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FRENCH CAMP - The 38-year run of San Joaquin General Hospital's dental clinic has ended. The clinic's last day was Friday.

The county says it will save \$350,000 a year, but the clinic's longtime manager and the last dentist to work there say that pales when held up to the patient suffering and inconvenience the closure will cause.

Clinic manager Barbara Gilbert, a 24-year employee of the county-run hospital and clinic system, and Dr. Farha Rasheed, the clinic's full-time dentist for five years, said they were threatened with termination by their superiors if they spoke to the media about the clinic while they worked there.

Gilbert retired Friday, and Rasheed was laid off. They spoke openly about what they had experienced the past several months.

Both said they fear for the welfare of low-income cancer and heart patients referred by their county hospital surgeons for dental work before undergoing life-saving operations.

"The patients that need clearance for chemotherapy and cancer or heart surgery and can't afford to have all their teeth pulled out have nowhere to go. I don't know if that will delay their cancer treatments because of it. They need to be free of infections before surgery," Rasheed said.

"And the thing is it is going to put a bigger hole in the county budget, because the patients who need teeth pulled are going to go to the (more expensive) emergency department and just get pain medicine. That doesn't fix the problem."

Gilbert noted that the dental clinic also treated HIV and AIDS patients who have few options.

San Joaquin County Health Director Ken Cohen said the clinic was established in 1971 to provide services to patients unable to access dental care elsewhere. He said that "the number of patients has been diminishing greatly over the past several years" and that since July 1, Medi-Cal insurance no longer covers the cost of dental services for adults older than 21, the clinic's primary demographic.

State law only requires that counties provide emergency dental care. They are not required to provide preventive or restorative care, so those patients are being referred to other community resources, Cohen said.

He also noted that operational costs, including salaries and benefits, have increased. Expensive equipment needed to be replaced due to age and obsolescence, Cohen said.

Gilbert, who primarily handled the clinic's books, disputed some of Cohen's assertions that the loss of Medi-Cal had any effect on clinic income or that the patient load was dropping off. She said most were uninsured, self-pay patients.

"They paid for their services. We did not have hardly any Medi-Cal patients at all - maybe 200 in the past eight years,"

Gilbert said, noting that during the same time period they treated about 10,000 patients.

Gilbert and Rasheed said hospital administrators used figures from the five-month period that Rasheed was out on maternity leave to make their case for diminishing patient loads, and they said that their Spanish-speaking dental assistant was taken away. That move discouraged the clinic's largest patient group from seeking services.

"Basically the Board of Supervisors (that authorized the clinic closure) doesn't know what is going on unless someone tells them. And what they know is not representative of the dental clinic. Administrators took my dental assistants away from me so I couldn't do any work. They won't let me do my job; you need a certain amount of people to run a clinic. It was set up to fail," Rasheed said.

She also said that in recent months, the clinic's fax machine - used to send and receive patient records - was removed, as were computers and copy machines.

They also weren't allowed to order supplies critical to patient needs, so certain procedures had to be delayed or couldn't be performed at all, Rasheed and Gilbert said.

The clinic was opened through the efforts of Drs. Guillermo Vicuña and Jack Jennings.

It was Vicuña - the clinic's first director and the founder of the Su Salud health fair and Tour of Life health-education program - that got Colgate to provide dental equipment and provide some financing throughout the years to supplement county funds.

He could not be reached for comment Friday, but at the time of the announced closure, he said:

"It's horrible. It's a violation of civil rights. We have to value the individual. We need to help each other."

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If you go

The San Joaquin County Board of Supervisors is set Tuesday to hear a presentation on a strategic business plan for San Joaquin General Hospital and could take action based on that report. It projects continued operating losses and lays out potential options for change, including giving up county control of the hospital and primary-care clinics.

The discussion will be held during the afternoon session of the board's regular meeting and is scheduled to begin at 1:30 p.m. in board chambers on the sixth floor of the San Joaquin County Administration Building, 44 N. San Joaquin St., Stockton.

A link to the report can be found at: www.sjchcs.org.