

Lewiston Tribune, Tuesday, May 13, 2008 – by Kathy Hedberg (2 pages)

Hospitals will alter policies in response to inmate attack

Changes intended to better protect other patients, staff

GRANGEVILLE - Hospitals in Cottonwood, Orofino and Grangeville are beefing up their security policies following an incident last month when an inmate patient attacked and injured an Idaho County deputy.

Todd Nida, chief administrative officer for St. Mary's and Clearwater Valley hospitals, and Joe Cladouhos, administrator for Syringa General Hospital, said Monday they are putting into place stricter policies governing inmate patients to protect other patients and hospital staff.

"We had to take a firmer stance to protect patients and employees both," said Nida, who devised the new policy for the Cottonwood and Orofino hospitals.

"This addresses patient/prisoner inmates. Our other security policies are still in place and we are also looking at other security issues, just to further expand on protecting patients and employees."

The policy revision follows an incident April 9 when Douglas G. Wood, of Kooskia, who was being held at the Lewis County Jail on charges relating to the alleged attempted murder of another Idaho County deputy in December, was at St. Mary's Hospital in Cottonwood after complaining of chest pains and a bad headache.

During the night, Wood asked his guard, Rick Shira, a jailer for the Idaho County Sheriff's Department, if he could use the restroom. Shira released Wood from leg shackles. When Wood returned, as Shira bent over to replace the shackles, Wood allegedly grabbed a heart monitor and began beating Shira over the head.

Wood then allegedly pushed Shira to the ground, grabbed the deputy's service firearm and aimed it at his head, pulling the trigger. The chamber was empty, but Wood allegedly charged the gun and shot again twice, missing Shira both times.

The deputy was attempting to subdue Wood when a hospital employee stepped in and helped get Wood under control. Wood, 41, who now is at the maximum security prison at Boise, is charged with battery with intent to commit a serious felony on a peace officer, attempted escape and battery on a police officer. His previous charges include aggravated battery on a peace officer and battery with the intent to commit murder and burglary.

Nida said the St. Mary's staff worked admirably in that situation. "Our staff reacted commendably and did everything correct and did everything they should have done," Nida said. "Normal procedure is to secure the area as best they could and call 911 for emergency help. And the fact that one of our employees got involved personally helping the officer in charge - he went above and beyond his job."

The new St. Mary's and Clearwater Valley security policy requires the custodial agency to provide two guards for inmate patients admitted to the hospitals.

Prisoners will be secured to the bed by one arm or leg unless the medical or surgical condition dictates otherwise. Restrictive devices will be required when escorting inmates to and from the restroom or when the prisoner is moved within the hospital. A guard must accompany the inmate at all times unless hospital treatment prohibits it; however, at those times a guard must remain as close as possible to the prisoner.

Inmate patients will be not allowed visitors or telephone calls and no information will be provided to the public about the patient.

Nida said that in the past, all security for inmate patients was left up to the custodial agency.

"We are living in changing times," Nida said. "We may be rural, but that no longer ensures our safety. It behooves us to be proactive in terms of security."

Cladouhos said the Syringa safety committee met Monday to discuss the issue and what measures might be employed to enhance safety at the Grangeville hospital.

"We are reviewing our policies based on that incident (at St. Mary's)," Cladouhos said. "Everyone in health care is re-evaluating their security policies after that incident. I'm sure we can use it constructively on our agenda."

The Syringa team plans to conduct a risk assessment, both on its building and workers outside the hospital, such as home health care nurses, to see how safety can be increased.

"Knowing that our hospital is a 24-hour facility and at night a very limited numbers of staff are on hand what options do we have to better protect them?" said Sue Kurruk, director of nurses at Syringa.

Kurruk said the hospital is considering classes for employees to emphasize "that their safety comes first. They are not expected to put themselves knowingly in danger."

Technology, such as surveillance cameras and automatic low-down equipment, might also become part of an improved safety policy, she added.