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St. Joe's ends its agreement with medical service provider

Failure to fulfill hospitalist recruiting promises cited

St. Joseph Regional Medical Center in Lewiston is backing out of the hospitalist agreement it has with EmCare, a national company that provides a variety of medical services.

EmCare has failed to fulfill promises it made to St. Joe's about recruiting hospitalists, said Tom Pfliger, vice president of professional services at St. Joe's. A hospitalist is a specialist with expertise in hospital care.

"We're disappointed with (the) decision made by St. Joseph Regional Medical Center, but we respect their choice and wish them nothing but success in their efforts," Douglas Moore, a spokesman for EmCare, said in a prepared statement.

Not having enough hospitalists has created hassles for area general practitioners who turn their patients over to the hospitalists while they're at St. Joe's or Tri-State Memorial Hospital in Clarkston, Pfliger said. It also has raised concerns about burn-out among the hospitalists.

St. Joe's plans to continue with the program, but it will employ the hospitalists instead of EmCare, Pfliger said.

How Tri-State will be affected by the decision isn't clear. EmCare shares five full-time hospitalists and six part-timers with the two hospitals. St. Joe's is working with Tri-State on a proposal for both hospitals to use the same pool of hospitalists, Pfliger said. "We're not going to abandon the patients at Tri-State."

Sister Mary Croghan, assistant administrator at Tri-State, said she is still in negotiations for continuation of the program. Croghan declined to elaborate. St. Joe's is confident its employees can do a better job at recruiting in a competitive field where every hospitalist has eight to 11 job offers, Pfliger said. "We want control over our own destiny."

When St. Joe's takes over the hospitalist service on July 1, it will have 13 physicians on staff, including the five hospitalists who are there now with Emcare, four oncologists and four psychiatrists, Pfliger said.

The hope is the move will solve problems that have surfaced with the program in the two years since it started.

St. Joe's has a cap on the number of patients a hospitalist can serve. That doesn't include people who don't have a general practice physician in the area. When the cap is met, general practice physicians have to step in to care for their patients. That means the general practice physicians might have to spend a couple hours in the hospital, not counting travel time, and cancel five patients from a 15-appointment schedule, Pfliger said.

The cap has most often been hit when viruses strike the region, making the volume at the hospital and local clinics higher, Pfliger said. But in spite of that issue the system generally works well, Pfliger said. St. Joe's has had revenue left after its expenses were met in its most recent fiscal year even though it subsidized the program.

All family practice and about half of the internists in the Lewiston-Clarkston Valley participate, Pfliger said.

Patients are beginning to accept the program, but Pfliger acknowledges some patients miss seeing their own doctors when hospitalized. It also fits with how medical schools are training general practice physicians. Many new medical school graduates expect to be able to practice at a clinic and seeing patients in the hospital is not a part of their duties. Many will not locate in communities where hospital rounds are part of their responsibilities, Pfliger said.