

License by Accreditation Taken to Task at Hospital

By David Zinman

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East Meadow—A consumer group took sharp issue yesterday with a recent change in the state health code allowing hospital accreditation surveys by a private group paid by hospitals to take the place of licensing inspections by state officials.

The criticism came during a sparsely attended public meeting opening the biennial survey of Nassau County Medical Center by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Hospitals, a consulting group. "The commission will be the only watchdog that the public will now have," said Joan Saltzman, president of The Consumer Advocates, a health-oriented consumer organization based in Great Neck.

The commission, a Chicago-based group founded by the American Hospital Association and the American Medical Association, is paid by each hospital it surveys. "The commission is hired by the hospitals," Saltzman said in an interview. "The hospitals own its report and, in a sense, owns them. They [the commission] are the guest of the hospital, and guests rarely insult their host." The medical center will pay the commission \$1,500 a day for its three-day survey.

Nevertheless, Delton Courtney, assistant director of the bureau of hospital services for the State Health Department, said the commission's reports had "high credibility." For example, Courtney said, the federal government accepts commission accreditation as a hospital's qualification for Medicare.

Reports from the state's licensing inspection teams, working under a set of standards different from the commission's, had been the only basis for licensing a hospital. When, in 1973, the Joint Commission gave the medical center only partial accreditation after finding 49 deficiencies, the state continued to license the hospital.

Now, a health code regulation adopted in July allows the state health commissioner to accept commission accreditation as certification for reissuing a hospital's operating license. A spokesman for the State Health Department said the new rule was adopted to cut down excessive state regulation. There is also a manpower problem in health department inspection units, the spokesman said, which also must check the many nursing homes and health-related facilities in the state.

But the spokesman said the department has not abrogated its responsibilities because it plans to have its own teams check those hospitals that the commission reports to have major problems. In addition, Courtney said, when the commission surveys major



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Ms. Ellen Beldock and Eisenberg confront each other during yesterday's hearing at county medical center.

hospitals, a state inspector will monitor the team and report to the health department. No state inspector was present for yesterday's survey.

Donald H. Eisenberg, superintendent of the county-owned medical center, said he would make public the commission's final evaluation when it is received in about two months.

However, Donald Rubin president of the Consumer Commission on the Accreditation of Health Service, a nonprofit group, said the survey reports released by some hospitals are merely summaries. Not made available, Rubin said, are the full survey reports and the detailed questionnaire that the hospital must fill out. Eisenberg said these documents are not the hospital's property but are retained by the commission.

When the survey began, Eisenberg declined to allow a representative of Community Advocates to accompany the commission team, as have some non-public hospitals on Long Island. Eisenberg said the team—a doctor, a hospital administrator and a nurse—was on a "tight schedule" and the presence of a consumer representative might slow down the survey. Testimony during the meeting came from a half dozen consumers whose complaints ranged from criticism of their personal treatment to charges that the nursing staff discriminated against black patients. Two people claimed that they knew of poor patients whom the center turned away because they could not produce Medicaid cards. Eisenberg denied discriminatory practices and refusing treatment to anyone.