

Patients Voice Med Center Gripes

By David Zinman
Newsday Science Writer

East Meadow—Consumer advocates met with investigators evaluating the Nassau County Medical Center yesterday and gave them a long list of grievances ranging from charges of job discrimination against blacks to a complaint that patients are not told where they can complain.

During a sometimes heated session at the start of the three-day survey, patients reported waiting for hours for attention in the emergency room, and waiting weeks and even months for clinic appointments. Complaints about the county's public hospital included such things as:

- A lack of translators for non-English speaking patients.
- A lack of women or minority-group members on the five-man board of managers, which sets policy for the center.
- A need for 24-hour emergency-room coverage by social services workers, who help with social problems related to patient care.

There were also complaints that the hospital makes only meager efforts to tell patients where to complain and fails to distribute the American Hospital Association's bill of rights for patients.

The most bizarre charge came from Mary Keise of Hempstead, who said that while she was immobilized after a car accident four years ago, a staff orderly and aide "made love, hugging and kissing . . . while patients weren't getting fed." She said her mother eventually had to hire private nurses for her. Dr. James P. Collins, center superintendent, said he would "remedy the situation" if he got the employees' names.

"It was clearly demonstrated," said Joan Saltzman of Community Advocates Inc., a health-oriented Nassau consumer group, "that the public has

concerns that the hospital is not aware of," Collins did not dispute that. "I'm hearing some things for the first time," he said.

Collins refused to comply with requests from the press and consumer groups to accompany inspectors on all or part of their hospital tour. But he did agree to hold a public session to discuss the commission's final accreditation report after it is filed in about three months.

The center is being surveyed by a three-man team from the Joint Commission for Accreditation of Hospitals. A renewed passing mark from the commission, a private group that sets na-

tional standards and evaluates hospitals, is usually necessary for hospitals to continue getting medicare payments. The loss of accreditation can jeopardize a hospital's intern- and resident-teaching status as well as its Blue Cross contracts.

Under a new commission policy that the center did not publicize, the survey team invites the public to meet with it. In the center's session yesterday, about 20 consumers and a similar number of hospital officials showed up. The officials were there, Collins said, to answer complaints. But one consumer complained that the doctors took too much time rebutting complaints in-

stead of letting the consumers be heard.

In one stormy bit of dialogue, Enzo Merritt of Community Organization Services, a group assisting welfare families living in motels, charged the center with engaging in discriminatory hiring practices. He said few blacks were employed and those who were held low-level jobs with little chance for advancement.

"I know a little black girl who went from nurse's aide to nurse," said Collins, disputing Merritt's allegation.

"When you say 'little black girl,'" Merritt said, "that is the exact indica-

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Survey team meets with consumer advocates, patients and representatives of the medical center

Newsday Photo by Dick A. Wood

Mr. Edward C. Blackman
CONSUMER COMMISSION

Medical Center Grievances

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tion of what I am talking about."

"I meant," Collins said, "she was small in stature but proud and tall in attitude." But when Collins later referred to a black woman in the audience as "girl," Merritt interrupted and asked him to use the term "lady."

Collins said he was "willing to stand here and say our percentage of minority employes was better than any other hospital I know."

"Give me some figures," Merritt said.

Collins said the County Human Rights Commission had them. However, James Rice, the commission's executive director, said an ethnic survey of the hospital had not been done since 1963 or 1964. That survey, he said, showed that most blacks held only "entry-level" positions. It indicated "a lot needed to be done," Rice said. A new survey, he added, is planned.

In responding to other consumer comments, a hospital spokesman:

- Disputed the claim that there are no translators, saying there are 44 doctors and 129 staff employes who can speak both Spanish and English. However, the spokesman said none work as interpreters. He said they have to be called away from their jobs.

- Admitted that there are emergency-room and clinic-appointment delays, that there are no consumer representatives on the board of managers and that there are no social services staff workers assigned to the emergency room from 10 PM to 9 AM weekdays, Saturday night and Sunday.

- Said the patients' bill of rights is scheduled to be printed and distributed soon and that the center was not aware that patients did not know where to complain. Complaints are handled by Collins' public relations director, who said he felt a number of interest in doubting as the patients' ombudsman.