

BUSINESS

Hoag bans elective abortions



Robert Braithwaite, chief executive officer of Hoag Memorial Hospital Presbyterian, said the hospital's elective abortion ban is for medical, not religious, reasons.

By **BERNARD J. WOLFSON** | Orange County Register

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Hoag Memorial Hospital Presbyterian told its affiliated physicians this week that they will no longer be allowed to perform elective abortions there. The announcement, in a letter to the doctors dated Wednesday, came two months after Hoag finalized its partnership with the St. Joseph Health System, a Catholic hospital group.

Robert Braithwaite, Hoag's CEO, said the decision was made independently by the Hoag board, not imposed by St. Joseph, and was for medical rather than religious reasons.

Some gynecologists and obstetricians who admit patients at Hoag were surprised and upset by the news. They said they had been led to believe that the affiliation with St. Joseph would not lead to any changes in the nature of care offered at Hoag – that the two systems would remain separate and autonomous.

They also expressed skepticism at Braithwaite's contention that the decision was not about Hoag adopting St. Joseph's Catholic values. The umbrella group that oversees the Hoag-St. Joseph alliance has formally endorsed St. Joseph's care philosophy.

"I did not know this was going to be happening once we affiliated with St. Joseph," said Alberto Mendivil, a gynecologic oncologist in Newport Beach, who sees patients at Hoag. "It was just going to be an affiliation – separate staffs with separate facilities. But now, with this directive, we are coming under the influence of the sisters of St. Joseph."

At St. Joseph facilities, which follow the Catholic Church's guidelines on health care, abortions and contraceptive practices are generally prohibited.

Braithwaite said that after a thorough analysis, the board had decided to eliminate "direct" abortions – procedures whose sole purpose is to terminate pregnancy before the fetus is considered medically viable – because the hospital performs such a low volume of them, fewer than 100 per year. He noted there is a well-known correlation between low volume and low quality of care.

"This was not a religious decision for Hoag," he said. "The board carefully examined all women's services at Hoag. We understand it's not a popular decision for some people in the community, but we think it was the right decision based on the quality-volume correlation."

Braithwaite stressed that as a condition of the affiliation agreement, "the only entity that can make a decision about a service that Hoag provides is the Hoag board."

He added that St. Joseph “did not try at any time to impose a Catholic belief or principal on the Hoag board’s decision process.”

The alliance of St. Joseph and Hoag creates an Orange County health-care powerhouse, providing roughly one-third of health care in the county through a network of six hospital facilities and their affiliated physician groups and outpatient clinics. The deal led to the creation of an umbrella group known as the Covenant Health Network.

At a press conference earlier this year to mark the completion of their deal, officials from Hoag and St. Joseph said the hospitals would retain their respective religious traditions, and those distinctions would also apply to reproductive health care.

However, the possibility that Hoag might discontinue abortions was broached in January during a public hearing convened by the office of California Attorney General Kamala Harris to review the St. Joseph-Hoag affiliation proposal.

In February, Harris gave her conditional approval to the deal. One of the conditions was that Hoag maintain all women’s services at current levels for at least 10 years following the affiliation with St. Joseph. This included contraceptive procedures such as tubal ligations, as well as management of non-viable pregnancies, and emergency contraception for victims of rape.

However, Harris said Hoag could discontinue direct abortions, “if and only if the St. Joseph Health System’s Common Values are subsequently adopted by Covenant Health Network Inc. and made applicable to Hoag.”

St. Joseph spokesman Brian Greene confirmed that Covenant had indeed adopted the St. Joseph statement of common values, and Hoag spokeswoman Heidi Pallares confirmed that it applies to Hoag.

Allyson Brooks, who heads the Women’s Health Institute at Hoag, said that abortions that were considered necessary to save the life of the mother would “absolutely” still be available at Hoag.

But that failed to allay the concerns of some physicians who practice there.

Lisa Abaid, a gynecologic oncologist, said Brooks’ assurances were “a little bit debatable.” While they would apply to pregnant women in immediate danger of bleeding out or suffering some other cataclysmic health problem, there is a “gray area” involving women with longer-term but serious health conditions that could be complicated by carrying a baby to term.

She noted that she had once terminated the pregnancy of a patient at 11 weeks in order to optimize the chances of successfully treating the woman's breast cancer. "Under the rules we have now, I would not have been able to perform that abortion," she said.

Beverly Sansone, an OB-GYN who practices at Hoag, said the issue at stake was bigger than abortion. "I feel it's a bad thing for a hospital merger to interfere in the doctor-physician relationship," she said.

Jeffrey Illeck, another Hoag affiliated OB-GYN, put it more bluntly. The decision by Hoag, he said, is just one more example of "the Catholic agenda that is slowly permeating the whole country to take away a woman's right to choose."

Hoag's Braithwaite expressed confidence that other facilities in Orange County could meet women's abortion needs more effectively.

Jon Dunn, president and CEO of Planned Parenthood of Orange and San Bernardino Counties, said he had been in talks since January about providing abortion services for women who would otherwise have gone to Hoag. "Planned Parenthood stands ready to assist women who need our services, and we are working with Hoag to put those services in place," he said.

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