

PHS on reduced staff, working from day to day

"Normally, July 1 was a gung-ho day," said a veteran staff member at the U.S. Public Health Service Hospital, Clifton. "We were getting doctors on the wards — it was a lot of work. But now it's depressing: It's like any other day."

The federal hospital, the largest of its kind in the United States, is operating with about one-third of its normal house staff — that group of eager young physicians called interns and residents.

Yesterday, the hospital, which is in limbo while its fate bounces through corridors in Washington, got only one intern, or a PGY I, post-graduate year one.

The hospital only has 25 physicians on its house staff, while in past years it has had 75.

Medical care is being dispensed by the lean house staff and about 75 physicians, many of whom are veteran PHS officers and department heads.

July 1 traditionally is a happy day in teaching hospitals, since fresh medical school graduates begin their clinical work as interns, a term that has been replaced by PGY Is.

But the PGY Is have stayed away from the U.S. Public Health Service Hospital because the Reagan administration has vowed to close all eight of the hospitals in the system.

PGYs make up a teaching hospital's house staff, delivering the majority of care in those hospitals training young physicians.

According to one veteran employee, some physicians, especially those in the Public Health Service, will be working 12-hour days to make up for the thinner house staff.

The Clifton hospital's census was 199 inpatients yesterday morning.

"We're not stopping admissions," Andrew Passeri, the hospital's associate director, said yesterday. "We have no directives to stop admissions."

He added that outpatient clinics are working "on a somewhat reduced level."

"There have been fewer physicians to see the patients and that generates less work," he said of his dwindling physicians.

To accommodate the leaner staff, Passeri said the hospital's critical care units — coronary and intensive care — have been consolidated, but emphasized that that is temporary since a 12-bed new critical care unit is being renovated.

The policy, according to a hospital source who requested anonymity, has been "business as usual," but they emphasized that that is impossible because the hospital's staff doesn't know how many more months they'll have a job.

The U.S. Senate has voted to keep funding the PHS hospitals through March.

Administrators of the Island's other four hospitals are scurrying to devise a study to see if it's feasible to save some portion of the hospital. They have about three more weeks to develop a preliminary plan.

Outwardly, the hospital seems to be operating with "business as usual," but clinic visits have been curtailed so that patients won't have long waits.

"It's a day-to-day existence," the source said yesterday.

They said rumors fly through the hospital constantly, and there seems to be a fresh one every day to further hinder morale.

The hospital is hiring physicians' assistants on a "per-shift" basis to do some of the work that its house staff normally would have done.

At least one person in the hospital, who knows about its scheduling policies, said part-time physicians, many of whom are former residents, will be hired to cover for their beleaguered counterparts.

"A lot of nurses have left, but it's not a critical condition. Patients have been consolidated and nursing units, too. No one is suffering as a result," a source said.

"We'll make it," the staffer said. "But it's going to be rough. For the ones staff staying here, it's more than a job."

Meanwhile, yesterday was the deadline for the state to file a letter of support with the federal Department of Health and Human Services to allow a community takeover of the hospital, but the letter is still sitting on Gov. Carey's desk, according to Congressman Guy V. Molinari.

Molinari said he has been in constant contact with the governor's office, inquiring about the status of the letter, and was told it would probably get out yesterday.

"This was curious, however, in that I was given similar assurances that it was on his desk awaiting signature over a week ago.

"It is clear to me that the governor's office is once again playing politics to the detriment of the people of Staten Island," Molinari said, adding that Carey's attitude appeared "cavalier."