

Hospital stops taking

patients

By ADAM PFEFFER

The U.S. Public Health Service Hospital in Clifton has stopped admitting patients and will begin a gradual slowdown of its operations until its closing Oct. 31.

Speaking to a luncheon crowd gathered to pay tribute to 150 years of nursing service at the hospital, Dr. Florence Kavalier, director of the facility, said, "This morning, we did receive a telephone call (from the Public Health Service headquarters in Washington) that we should stop admitting patients as of this afternoon."

"There will be a total phase-down of operations over the next few weeks," she added. "But everything can change next Tuesday, you know that."

After the speech, Dr. Kavalier refused to explain the specifics of the phasedown, saying that they were contained in a lengthy report.

Although she said in-patient care would continue at the facility, she added, "Some appointments will be cancelled."

Dr. Kavalier said during her speech that her office alerted the other hospitals on the Island as to the Clifton facility's phase-down plans.

She said the hospitals were contacted "to let them know the problems the Island will be faced with" in the coming months.

Dr. Kavalier concluded her speech by announcing an emergency meeting with her chiefs of services "so they can be in readiness" for the hospital's gradual closing.

"I hope in the next few weeks, cool heads will prevail," she said to the facility's nursing contingent. "We are still a hospital and we do need you."

In marking the hospital's 150th anniversary, Dr. Kavalier alluded to the fact that the facility was shut down once before.

In the 1870s, she explained, the hospital was moved due to a lack of both federal and state funding to the Army base on Bedloe's Island. When the Statue of Liberty was completed in France and shipped to the United States in the mid-1880s, the hospital moved back to its current location in Clifton.

While Dr. Kavalier was making her speech on the third floor of the original PHS hospital building, Health and Human Services Secretary Richard Schweiker was announcing in Washington that all Public Health Service hospitals would cease admitting patients by noon yesterday.

Dr. Kavalier, appointed director of the Clifton facility in 1976, was the first woman to head any federal hospital or outpatient service in the country. Yesterday she referred to herself as "maybe the last director" of the Island hospital.

Meanwhile, Dr. Faye Abdellah, assistant surgeon general and chief nursing officer of the Public Health Service, tried to inject some optimism into those gathered to celebrate the 150th anniversary.

"I would not be surprised if we get the order Tuesday to carry on," she said. "I think it's a day of moving forward."

Employees and patients of the hospital were initially notified of the phasedown plans yesterday in a most unusual way. At about 12:30 p.m., someone announced over the public address system, "Attention please, the hospital will be closing at 1 p.m."

Asked for his reaction to the closing, a hospital employee said, "we don't have any feelings. We're numb. We're just resigned to the fact that the hospital is closing and we're out in the cold."

The employee, who was later given a stern warning by hospital officials not to talk to reporters, said he had worked at the PHS hospital for nine years. Previous to that, he worked at the now-shuttered Brooklyn Navy Yard.

Asked to compare the two closings, he responded, "Over there it was orderly, over here it's chaos."

"I've got three children, what am I going to do?" he asked.

The employee said that many workers have begun looking for jobs at either the Veterans Administration hospitals in Brooklyn and Manhattan or on Governor's Island.

"I have four children to feed," another worker commented. "I've just bought a house. I've got a mortgage to pay."

When asked if he thought he might now lose the house, he answered, "Yeah, because I don't have a job."

The Clifton hospital's closing was first announced on Thursday when the Department of Health and Human Services said St. Vincent's Medical Center's takeover proposal was no longer feasible since it was contingent upon federal funds that failed to materialize.

The medical center planned to use the federal money to assume control of the Clifton facility and convert it into a community hospital.

St. Vincent's officials estimated the cost of the conversion at \$39 million.