

Patients say closing could be death warrant

By ADAM PFEFFER

Alphonso Buono of Rosebank has been coming to the U.S. Public Health Service Hospital in Clifton for the past eight years because of chronic heart problems.

Currently, Buono is confined to a bed on the hospital's second floor ward. On Oct. 31, the hospital's scheduled closing, Buono and the rest of the patients at the facility will be forced to move elsewhere.

"I'm disabled; I can't move; I'm an open heart patient," he says. "All I have is a pension."

In contrast to ever-rising hospital costs, Buono's pension of \$771 a month has not increased in eight years.

"So my money is my survival, and I can't afford to be a paying patient at another hospital," he explains.

For Buono and others like him, keeping the Clifton facility open is a matter of survival.

"To me, you're just killing people automatically by closing this place," he says.

Buono, who suffers from something called cardiac arrhythmia (an irregular heart-beat), explains that the other hospitals on the Island just do not have the correct facilities to treat a patient with his type of illness.

"Where else can you go?" he says in despair. "Either Manhattan or Brooklyn, and by the time I got there in my condition, I'd be dead."

Despite the fact that a St. Vincent's Medical Center official said yesterday that the hospital is "well equipped to treat cardiac arrhythmia," Buono fears that the increased number of patients at the facility may lead to a costly delay in medical care.

"You're just trading off lives without even having a war," he says.

Blaming President Reagan for the hospital's closing, Buono adds, "You spend so much money to improve the human life, but here this man is actually ready to kill people."

Buono looks up from his hospital bed, the bottle filled with liquid above his head bubbling. "We're not asking for handouts, all we're asking for is to survive. Maybe other communities can take up the slack," Buono

now says, "but Staten Island cannot."

Down the hall, Joseph Vasta of Grasmere wonders where he will find another hospital bed. Vasta, a patient at the Clifton facility for the past eight months, has had heart problems for about seven years.

"They've taken care of me; they've kept me alive," he says of the PHS hospital.

Asked what hospital he will now be moved to, Vasta says, "I don't know at this point. It's blank; I really don't know."

As he rummages through his hospital lunch tray, Vasta explains how he cannot afford to be moved to another hospital. "I've been sick about seven years, and the little money I did have is completely gone," he says. "There's probably other people in the same boat. I don't know what to tell you. It's terrible."

On the fifth floor, Murray Paige has been recuperating from vascular surgery that has left him a double amputee.

"I will be moved to another hospital. I don't know where yet; it's in the works," he says as he listens to the Mets baseball game over the radio.

Paige, a resident of Jackson Heights in Queens, says he was sent to the Clifton hospital because of the merchant seamen exemption. That exemption, which offered free hospital care to the merchant seamen, is now also a victim of budget cuts.

"I'm sorry to see it closed. Not so much for myself, but for the people of Staten Island," he says.

"It means I have to leave a place I'm very familiar with and start someplace else," he adds.

"In my case, not every hospital would take me because I have various complications," he explains, although he quickly says that he is optimistic another hospital will be found.

Katherine McPherson-Lyte is a nurse at the PHS hospital. The Elm Park resident, however, will soon be unemployed.

"It's easier for me than the patients," she says. "Private hospitals are out of the question for most of our patients."

She adds she is not really worried about finding another job, since there is currently a shortage of nurses in the area.

"I've been trying other hospitals and nursing homes," she says.

Don Free of West Haven, Conn., has been a patient at the hospital since Aug. 25.

Asked where he will be transferred, Free looked up and said, "That's a good question because we don't know where to search now."

"I voted for President Reagan. However, with this drastic cut, he's causing an unnecessary hardship," he adds.

Meanwhile, the closing affects more than just the patients inside the hospital. According to Sylvia Jacobson, president of the Board of Directors of Meals on Wheels of Staten Island, the closing will have an effect on those program participants living on the eastern end of the Island.

Currently, the Meals on Wheels program purchases 200 meals a day from the PHS hospital.

"It will be very difficult serving that end of the Island," she said. "And that's the same community that's going to lose out on medical services, too."