



Wichita hospital execs say they'll scale back KU residencies

By Dave Ranney
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WICHITA — Wesley Medical Center and Via Christi Health Systems executives on Tuesday said they cannot afford to continue underwriting much of the state's graduate medical education program.

"This is a state responsibility, it is not the responsibility of the two major hospitals in Wichita," said Kevin Conlin, chief executive officer at Via Christi.

Conlin said that without additional state aid, Via Christi will reduce or eliminate its residency programs.

Wesley will as well, said Hugh Tappan, the hospital's chief executive officer.

The two hospitals' residency programs produce most of the state's rural doctors.

Tappan and Conlin delivered their joint ultimatum during a Physician Workforce and Accreditation Task Force meeting at Wichita State University.

The task force, among other things, is charged with developing a plan for keeping the programs afloat.

The residency programs are administered by the Wichita Center for Graduate Medical Education, a coalition comprised of Wesley, Via Christi, and the University of Kansas School of Medicine-Wichita.

Conlin said Via Christi's residency programs cost the hospital at least \$2.5 million last year; Wesley's programs, Tappan said, cost more than \$1 million.

The shortfalls are driven by residents spending much of their time seeing patients who cannot pay their bills.

In earlier task force discussions, questions were raised as to whether Via Christi and Wesley were dumping a portion of their indigent-care losses — \$3 million — onto WCGME.

"That has been the nature of the discussions in the past, but this is not an indigent-care issue," Tappan said. "The issue is graduate medical education."

Last year, he said, Wesley's charity-care costs exceeded \$38 million. They're expected

to reach \$50 million this year.

Via Christi provided more than \$56 million in charity care in the fiscal year ending in September.

Conlin and Tappan said their resistance to continuing to underwrite the residency programs' losses is driven by the ever-increasing prospects for more — rather than less — red ink.

“At the moment, there’s no end in sight,” Tappan said.

“We have a long tradition of supporting these programs,” Conlin said. “Unfortunately, things have reached the point where that support is doing harm to Via Christi Health Systems as a whole. This is a state responsibility; it’s not a hospital responsibility. We should not be asked to serve as some kind of budget equalizer for (graduate medical education).”

Conlin and Tappan warned legislators on the task force that cuts in the residency programs would hurt the state’s underserved rural communities far more than the Wichita hospitals.

“We’re big enough, we won’t have trouble recruiting physicians,” Tappan said.

The hospitals’ ultimatum wasn’t unexpected.

“We’d sort of heard about it, but there wasn’t anything in writing,” said Rep. Brenda Landwehr, R-Wichita. “But now that it’s in writing... I had to catch my breath. This is really going to be tough. It’s scary.”

During this year’s legislative session, WCGME officials said they needed \$9.6 million to offset rising costs and to meet new, more rigorous accreditation standards. They received a one-year \$2.5 million allocation through the Kansas Board of Regents, and a green light for receiving \$2.9 million from the Kansas Bioscience Authority.

WCGME officials said they intend to ask the 2009 Legislature for \$9.6 million.

But Dr. Barbara Atkinson, dean of the KU School of Medicine in Kansas City, said she had been told not to expect Gov. Kathleen Sebelius to include the \$2.5 million appropriated last session for the program in her proposed budget for Fiscal Year 2010.

And the medical school, she said, already has been directed to cut its fiscal 2009 spending by \$3.7 million and its fiscal 2010 spending by \$8.5 million.

“These are huge cuts,” Atkinson said. “Very difficult.”

Atkinson said she supports the \$9.6 million request but was prepared to defend only the renewal of the \$2.5 million allocation because she did not have access to Wesley and Via Christi’s books.

She assured the task force that KU School of Medicine has — and will — assume responsibility for the residency programs being able to maintain their accreditation. The WCGME program trains about 270 residents in 14 specializations, including family medicine.

The task force did not discuss what it might recommend to deal with the problem.

“We ran out of time and the weather didn’t do us any favors. A lot of people had to leave,” Landwehr said. “I suspect we’ll set up a conference call.”

The day’s weather conditions included snow, high winds, and freezing rain. The meeting lasted until 5 p.m.