

Las Vegas Sun

UMC still hopeful on opening of trauma center

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Clark County Commissioner Erin Kenny tentatively scheduled a news conference this afternoon to announce what county officials had hoped would be the reopening of the University Medical Center trauma unit.

Officials spent the morning trying to confirm they had enough doctors to reopen the center. A deal was still developing this morning after a night of negotiations.

The announcement was tentatively scheduled for 12:15 p.m. but subject to last-minute change.

The reopening of the trauma center that was closed on July 3 would be the culmination of negotiations between public officials and surgeons that began Sunday and continued through this morning.

Las Vegas attorney Gus Flangas, who represents some of the orthopedic surgeons, said today he was "very certain" a press conference would be called today.

"It's looking very promising now," Flangas said. "But I really don't want to guess about the announcement. There's still a lot of details to be worked out."

Chris Ferrari, a spokesman for a coalition of physicians seeking tort reform, also expressed confidence this morning that a press conference would be called later today.

"There has been some progress made, but nothing is final," Ferrari said.

Kenny, chairwoman of the hospital board that sets policy for county-run UMC, had said Thursday evening that the hospital is still short of the minimum 12 orthopedic surgeons it needs to operate the trauma center round the clock. But she was working this morning on securing the additional surgeons necessary to open the center.

Orthopedic surgeons affiliated with the trauma center are on call for 24-hour shifts on a rotating basis. Being on call requires the surgeon to reach the trauma center within 30 minutes.

Kenny had expressed hope Thursday that an agreement would be reached as early as this afternoon to reopen the trauma center this weekend.

"It is a moment-by-moment situation," Kenny said. "It's very tenuous."

Kenny said Gov. Kenny Guinn has also participated in the negotiations. At a press conference Thursday in which he revealed that he had prostate cancer, Guinn also told reporters that he was hopeful an announcement would be made today regarding the trauma center.

"I never give up hope," Kenny said. "We'll continue to work on this as long as it takes."

Kenny said she did not know how long it would take to reopen the trauma center.

Closure of the state's only level one trauma unit on July 3 made the Las Vegas Valley the nation's

largest metropolitan area without a trauma center. Trauma patients were sent to the nearest hospital instead.

UMC was forced to close the center after all but one of its 58 orthopedic surgeons resigned. They said they could no longer afford to treat high-risk trauma patients because of the rising cost of medical malpractice insurance and their exposure to potential litigation. But lawyers accused the surgeons of holding the community hostage in an effort to gain tort reform.

Some surgeons said their fears were allayed temporarily when the state attorney general's office issued an opinion that the county-run hospital's \$50,000 liability cap could be extended to them for 45 days after the trauma center reopened.

The purpose of the temporary cap extension is to protect doctors from expensive litigation while the state Legislature meets in special session later this month to debate the merits of medical malpractice insurance reforms.

The trauma center opened in 1989, and achieved level one status -- the highest that can be attained -- in January 1999. Most of its patients are victims of motor vehicles crashes, other blunt injuries, gunshots or stab wounds.

Even if the trauma center reopens, there is a chance it will close down again later this year if doctors are not satisfied with the results of the special legislative session in Carson City.

Doctors want lawmakers to adopt a California tort reform package that was approved in 1975, though that legislation was forced to withstand 10 years of legal challenges before becoming fully implemented. Key provisions of that law include a \$250,000 cap on damages for pain and suffering and a sliding scale for attorneys' fees.

Proponents of California's law say it has stabilized medical liability insurance rates and kept doctors in that state. But lawyers say the law is unfair to injured patients and dispute the impact it has had on insurance rates.

Instead, the lawyers want reforms that would prevent insurance companies from raising rates when they lose malpractice trials that could have been settled for much less money out of court. Lawyers also support mandatory reporting of medical errors, with the information made available to the public.

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