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Augusta Health exec sees U.Va. deal to buy oncology practice as 'cherry-picking'

Jun 11, 2011 | 26 Comments



Written by **David Ress**

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FISHERSVILLE — The University of Virginia Health System has reached deep into rival Augusta Health's business with a deal to buy the practice of a group of cancer doctors.

Those doctors, members of Hematology Oncology Patient Enterprises, or HOPE, play a critical role in Augusta Health's cancer center, and in the financial health of the hospital.

Oncology, or the treatment of cancer, is one of the most profitable services there — as at many hospitals — and supports a wide range of other services where Augusta Health's expenses exceed its revenue.

"They're cherry-picking," said Victor Santos, vice chairman of Augusta Health's board of directors. "It's just like cardiology, they're going to come and take patients over the mountain," Santos said, referring to a dispute last year during which Augusta Health said U.Va. tried to acquire part of Augusta Health's cardiology service. Augusta Health responded by canceling U.Va. cardiologists' privileges at the Fishersville hospital, setting up its own service instead.

U.Va and HOPE both said they aim to keep caring for Valley patients close to home, but Augusta Health officials say the deal

breaches HOPE's contract with it.

Augusta Health's exclusive contract with HOPE, which runs through September, 2012, includes language barring a change in ownership and requiring the group to work at the hospital's cancer center, Augusta Health Chief Executive Mary Mannix said.

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She said hospital officials have heard from multiple sources that U.Va. plans to set up a cancer clinic in its recently acquired medical office building across the street from Augusta Health. Several Augusta Health employees have reported solicitations to move there and join U.Va., she said.

"We don't want to see the care at the cancer center fragmented. That's why this matters," Mannix said.

Larry Fitzgerald, associate vice president for business development and finance at U.Va., said the medical system wants HOPE to continue providing service where it has.

He said the deal is not aimed at directing patients — and the large sums their insurers pay for care — from Augusta Health to U.Va.

Instead, it is a key step in U.Va.'s bid to be the first Virginia hospital to be designated as a comprehensive cancer center by the National Cancer Institute, he said. The institute requires comprehensive community outreach treatment, which HOPE provides from its offices in Fishersville, Culpeper, Farmville and Charlottesville, he said.

"We're part of the community, and we intend to keep caring for the community," said Dr Maya Ghaemmaghami, the HOPE physician acting as the group's spokeswoman.

She said that includes continuing to serve people here, noting that care near home is vital for patients receiving chemotherapy or radiation treatment.

"I just don't see how it is possible for them to stay" in Augusta Health's cancer center, said Dr. David Caulkins, a surgeon who has worked closely with the HOPE group for years.

He said he's not sure how the group's new affiliation will affect where his patients are treated or whether he will need to work more with other oncologists in the future.

"We're feeling sorry these guys have sold themselves for a significant amount of money to U.Va.," he said. "I think everybody is a little disappointed."

Neither Fitzgerald or Ghaemmaghami would comment when asked how much U.Va. is paying for the \$35-million-a-year HOPE practice. The practice generates a profit of \$2 million to \$3 million a year, Fitzgerald said.

He said U.Va. offered Augusta Health a chance to buy a part interest in HOPE as part of the deal but had not heard back from the Fishersville hospital.

Medical oncology generates the largest revenues per case of all nonsurgical services at Augusta Health, or an average charge of \$17,311 per case in 2009, the latest year for which data are available, according to Virginia Health Information, a cost-reporting service of the state's hospitals and insurers. It is one of many services at U.Va. that is profitable, Fitzgerald said. Virginia Health Information reports

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