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## For community's sake, find hospital solution

*Editorials*

The controversy over the looming breakup of the Health Alliance of Greater Cincinnati - and what it could mean to University Hospital - has divided community opinion. But on one point, we all can agree:

University Hospital is one of our region's most vital treasures.

As its Web site notes, it "has provided the Greater Cincinnati region, nation and even the world with high-quality, compassionate care, cutting-edge research and education for over 186 years."

That says it in a nutshell. And today's stories by Cliff Peale fill that portrait out, demonstrating what the hospital means to Greater Cincinnati - its Air Care services, the only Level I trauma center in the region, physician education, indigent care, top-notch medical specialties, research programs and much more.

It is one of the nation's top hospitals, and it is *the* key component in our region's medical establishment.

We are in a fragile economy. Health care is undergoing rapid changes. Growing social pressures are adding to the burden on institutions.

So any major change in our health system's structure and funding must be done with extreme care and deliberation.

Jewish Hospital's move to leave the Alliance and merge with Mercy Health Partners is just such a major change.

Ultimately, those parties may have the right to go through with this merger, but they have a wider community responsibility to ensure that their actions do no harm.

Pushing this deal through by the end of the year, as they intend, *will* do harm if solid financial alternatives are not in place.

We urge them to put the brakes on this deal - and to take the time to help craft a solution that's in the best, long-term interests of everybody involved.

Ohio Attorney General Richard Cordray put it bluntly during a visit to The Enquirer on

Thursday, telling both sides, in essence, to grow up:

"They need to proceed with their discussions and work it out," Cordray said. "We're not going to let our office be manipulated to serve the agenda of people here who need to sit down and consult with each other in a more mature way."

We agree that all sides must consult honestly and work something out honorably.

But if they *don't* work it out in the coming weeks, Cordray has a duty to the state's residents to step in and make sure this major public asset is not harmed.

### **Financial stability at risk**

Jewish Hospital in Kenwood is the most profitable member of the Alliance, in which University Hospital is the major partner. It does not have the sort of costly obligations - teaching, indigent care, research - that University Hospital has. Its departure would likely end the Alliance - and the financial stability on which University Hospital relies.

University Hospital officials say they need a system in place or subsidies from other hospitals to help finance their services.

The loss of Jewish Hospital could damage the financial underpinnings not only of the hospital itself, but of other vital institutions and services. University Hospital supplies about \$50 million a year to the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine and to UC Physicians and College of Medicine. If it cannot maintain that, the integrity of the area's only major medical school, and of UC itself, will be at risk.

University Hospital also provides \$98.9 million a year in charity care and other public benefits - and the Hamilton County indigent levy and Medicaid payments cover barely half of that cost. Clearly it relies on profits elsewhere - such as at Jewish - to help close the gap.

Despite its implications, the pending Jewish deal has only recently attracted wide public attention. The city of Cincinnati has a stake in the issue - symbolically perhaps because it still owns the land on which University Hospital is built, more practically because many city residents receive medical services there that they might not otherwise be able to obtain.

City Council members have held hearings to give the public more information, and many local leaders are asking Cordray to force a three-month delay on the deal.

Cordray, who's up for re-election next year, figures it's a no-win situation politically for him if he intervenes, so he's trying to play it down the middle.

"We're not going to game the system to give an advantage to one side or the other," he told The Enquirer.

That's all well and good, but the state and its taxpayers have a vested interest in the health of University Hospital - UC is a client of Cordray's office, in fact.

If the parties cannot come together freely and craft a viable community solution, Cordray has a responsibility to protect Ohioans' interests.

### **Wider community engaged**

The Jewish Foundation, which owns Jewish Hospital, wants to use the approximately \$180 million in proceeds from the Mercy deal for its local charitable works. It makes some good arguments in favor of the move, pointing out the financial contributions it has made to the Alliance over the years. But it's also true the Alliance has been good to Jewish Hospital in many ways as well.

Foundation officials say this has been no rush deal. They point out they have been looking to sell Jewish Hospital for more than a year and a half, and have given the Alliance opportunities to buy it, only to be negotiating with a changing cast of players at UC and University Hospital.

Perhaps that's true, but University Hospital and associated institutions are not ready to deal with the aftermath of a Jewish pullout. Now that the wider community has become engaged in the issue, a better solution is possible - but requires more time.

The Foundation's suggestion that the Alliance simply sell the West Chester Medical Center to provide funds for University Hospital is short-sighted. While the new facility is a financial burden right now, it will be a great benefit to whatever system it belongs to in the longer term.

Despite what the Foundation side says, it is not simply a question of whether University Hospital is "broke" or not, or if it's showing a profit at the end of the year.

It's whether or not the hospital will have the full resources to do its multifaceted job at a level that our community has a right to expect.

Clearly, it will not - certainly not past the immediate term.

If Jewish Hospital pulls out of the Alliance in just a few short weeks, there no guarantee that University Hospital will be able to fill the gap any time soon. There is no stable, long-term solution in place.

Our community will suffer. People will suffer.

### **Two different conversations**

The two sides in this dispute have been engaged in two different conversations. To a large degree, they have been talking past each other.

The Foundation has been discussing revenue numbers, contract issues and legal procedures. The hospital has been talking about its mission and values.

At some point very soon, these conversations must converge - and the locus must be the community's best interests.

Those best interests demand a strong, efficient regional medical system with a vibrant University Hospital at its core.

Those best interests demand prudent planning and wise use of public and private resources in a changing and uncertain health-care environment.

Those best interests demand a public process to build confidence in a solution that works for everybody.

Put the deal on hold.

Protect University Hospital and all the programs that rely on it.

Take the time to get it right.