



POWERED BY YOU AND THE
Enquirer • Community Press & Recorder

November 19, 2009

University Hospital serves thousands of poor patients

Cliff Peale

Patricia Gover has been visiting her doctor at University Hospital for nearly two decades.

So when the College Hill retiree dropped her insurance last year because she couldn't afford the premiums, she worried about her heart and the arthritis in her hip.

A year later, she's received a painkilling shot in her hip and will have a defibrillator implanted at University next month, all without paying a dime for her medical care and only \$3 for each dose of her medicines.

"They make sure you're taken care of, insurance or not," said Gover, 62. "My care has not changed at all."

That safety-net care has been a mission of University Hospital since it was founded in 1823. Last year it provided nearly \$100 million in community benefit, including traditional charity care such as that received by Gover.

- [Photos: University Hospital through the years](#)
- [University Hospital articles of incorporation, 1996](#)
- [Health Alliance settlement, 2003](#)
- [University Hospital report to Hamilton County, 2009](#)

Every hospital throughout Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky treats patients who arrive with no ability to pay. But University Hospital provides more than twice as much care as any other hospital.

It is the only adult hospital in the region to receive direct taxpayer subsidies for safety-net care, collecting \$26 million a year from a Hamilton County tax levy. It also receives about \$25 million a year in Medicaid money for its high percentage of safety-net patients.

Indigent care is at the core of University Hospital's value to the region and at the core of the dispute over its future viability.

With the Health Alliance of Greater Cincinnati dissolving, the hospital will be unable to rely on the more-profitable Jewish Hospital to help finance its safety-net mission, specialized services and the region's only top-level trauma center.

Judith Warren of Health Care Access Now, a group targeting disparities in access to health

care around the region, told Cincinnati City Council this month that half of all of the region's avoidable emergency room visits are in Hamilton County and nearly one-quarter of those are from patients without insurance.

If University Hospital's safety-net mission is compromised, she said, rates of diabetes, low birthweights and other health problems can only get worse.

"The health-care system as it currently stands in our community is at risk," she said.

Doctors at University Hospital say not only do those without financial means get care at University Hospital, they get cutting-edge medical treatments because of University's connection to the University of Cincinnati and its emphasis on research and training medical residents.

"It's a weird irony to be poor and to end up in this fabulous place," said Eric Warm, director of the internal medicine residency program.

That ethos spreads throughout the Corryville hospital. For example:

In the hospital's on-site dental clinic, two dentists and four medical residents treated 6,204 patients last year, most of them unable to pay.

About 10 percent of patients who show up at University's emergency department are seeking help for dental problems.

Money from the indigent-care levy can be spent only to treat pain or infection. Beyond those basics, University subsidizes the dental clinic at about \$795,000 per year.

At Psychiatric Emergency Services, a 48-bed unit that costs more than \$5 million a year, visits are up more than 15 percent this year to about 950 per month, said Charles Collins, chief clinical officer for psychiatry.

The clinic has more than 20 doctors and trains about 40 residents. The average patient stays nearly six days and doctors see more patients when the economy is down, Collins said.

"I can't imagine how it would be (for patients) if this wasn't here," he said. "They would probably just be walking around the city."