

# Mainland hospital says UTMB shirking charity care

By Harvey Rice | March 11, 2012

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Photo By Nick de la Torre

Dr. Tarek Koussayer, right, goes over his patient notes Thursday at Mainland Medical Center's emergency room in Texas City. Koussayer says patients turned away by UTMB often land in the Mainland ER. Photo: Nick De La Torre / © 2012 Houston Chronicle

GALVESTON - Leaders of Galveston County's only private hospital say a dramatic reduction in charity care by the tax-supported **University of Texas Medical Branch** in Galveston is placing an increasing burden on the hospital and on doctors in private practice.

Mainland Medical Center's share of charity and self-pay patients, who often pay little or nothing, has increased since Hurricane Ike in 2008 even though UTMB has recovered and is adding new buildings, Medical Center CEO **Rob Hiefner** said. Among the new buildings planned is a \$438 million surgical tower with at least 246 beds.

Hiefner said UTMB receives money from the Legislature for charity care but is turning away non-paying patients who end up at Mainland Medical Center, which receives no state money other than Medicaid-Medicare reimbursements. The Legislature appropriated \$7 million to UTMB for indigent care for fiscal 2011. The institution received a total of \$489.36 million in public funds.

**Texas Hospital Association** discharge figures show that charity and self-pay discharges at UTMB fell from 10,850 in 2008 to 1,672 in 2011. UTMB was provided the figures and did not challenge them.

Hiefner also complained that it's unfair for a state-subsidized hospital to compete with a private hospital and private doctors. UTMB has expanded aggressively on the mainland in recent years, opening dozens of clinics and building a state-of-the-art specialty care center in League City.

In a statement, UTMB said it provided \$130.9 million in uncompensated care in fiscal year 2010.

"We also provide much-needed services to county residents through a variety of innovative programs and will continue working with our community partners to more effectively address the needs of our most vulnerable residents," the statement said.

The statement did not address Hiefner's assertions about the burden on Mainland and private physicians as a result of UTMB's decision to decrease charity care nor the fairness of a state institution competing with a private hospital.

Policy called vague

Mainland Medical Center has a charity policy that compels it to treat patients who fall within certain guidelines. A legal service for the poor, Lone Star Legal Aid, has said that UTMB's charity policy is so vague it might not meet legal standards.

"While we are seeing more and more people for free so the public doesn't see them dying on the street, nobody wants to acknowledge how it's being paid for," said Dr. **Albert T. Kocurek**, Mainland Medical Center's chief of medical staff.

Two private Harris County hospitals near the Galveston County boundary also attribute an increase in the number of charity patients to UTMB's decision to see fewer uninsured. Mainland is a satellite hospital of League City-based **Clear Lake Regional Medical Center**, owned by **HCA Holdings** Inc., that also has seen a substantial increase in charity patients since Ike.

"You look at the numbers of charity and self-pay and say, wow," said **Stephen K. Jones Jr.**, the **Clear Lake hospital's** CEO.

**Christus St. John Hospital** in Nassau Bay also has seen an uptick in charity patients that cannot be attributed to Hurricane Ike, Administrator **Tom Permetti** said.

Permetti said the number of uninsured patients arriving at hospitals is growing nationwide, "but clearly there is some growth associated with the reduction in services by UTMB."

Measured by bad debt, or the amount of unpaid care, the number of charity and self-pay patients from Galveston County at Christus is up 33.59 percent when comparing the 12 months before Hurricane Ike, which struck in September 2008, with the 12 months ending June 2011, Permetti said.

As is the case in most hospitals, 80 percent of charity care patients at Mainland come to the emergency room, said Dr. **Tarek Koussayer**, emergency room medical director.

"Charity has increased from 15 to 20 percent and is now up to 30 percent over the last two years," Koussayer said. "That's equal to about 12,000 patients a year."

Emergency room doctors must pay \$20 malpractice insurance for each charity patient, he said. "Not only do we not collect anything, we lose money," he said.

Koussayer said patients turned away by UTMB occasionally are treated in the Mainland emergency room. "We don't feel like everybody is doing their share," he said. "They are getting the money from the state, the tax money we are paying."

#### Look at market share

Hiefner said the best measure of how the burden of charity care is spread among hospitals is the percentage of charity and self-pay patients discharged compared to each hospital's market share.

Mainland had a 1.44 percent share of the Houston-region market in 2011, according to the THA, but 2.1 percent of the charity and self-pay discharges. UTMB in contrast had a 4.15 percent market share but 2.97 percent of charity and self-pay discharges.

"What that means is we have to account for that greater burden," Hiefner said about his smaller hospital. "It's a greater drain on the resources of the hospital."

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