

Talks on UTMB charity care fall flat

By Harvey Rice | June 24, 2012 | Updated: June 24, 2012 11:03pm

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GALVESTON - Two months of secret negotiations over the [University of Texas Medical Branch](#)'s much-criticized charity policy ended in failure after UTMB refused to accept changes offered by two community groups.

The two groups have been urging UTMB to change its charity policy since 2008 and have persisted as the number of charity referrals accepted by UTMB dropped dramatically. Once known for its willingness to care for the uninsured, UTMB turned away 91 percent of potential charity referrals in 2011, up from 35 percent in 2005, according to figures released last week by the two groups.

Galveston County residents fared no better than those from outside the county. UTMB denied charity care to 90 percent of all unsponsored referrals of county residents, the report said.

UTMB spokesman [Raul Reyes](#), who was provided with the communities group report, did not dispute its findings. Galveston County has asked that UTMB turn away anyone enrolled in the county's indigent care program, Reyes said.

"The main driver is the lack of a contract with Galveston County," he said. "If a Galveston County patient is part of the indigent care program, we have to deny them because that's what Galveston County has asked them to do."

County Health District spokesman [Kurt Koopman](#) said the county has made no such request.

The community groups say it's impossible to read UTMB's state-required charity policy and understand who is eligible for free or discounted treatment. Potential charity patients are denied care before they are screened to determine their ability to pay, the groups say.

Use of committees

Reyes said UTMB will continue to work with the groups to create a better policy. "I agree that the policy needs to be clear and we're working on that," he said. "I think everyone here would like to be able to treat as many people as possible. Unfortunately, we are not able to open the doors as wide as possible."

The groups also accuse UTMB of using "casebook" committees that choose charity cases based on whether their treatment will assist in the education of medical students.

"Determination of the value of a person, educational or otherwise, for the purpose of providing or denying medical care violates the commitment of physicians and hospitals to act for the benefit of their patients," the groups' report says. "The people of Texas do not exist to serve the educational needs of teaching hospitals. Rather, teaching hospitals should exist to attend to the health needs of the communities they serve."

Reyes replied, "Our core mission is that of an academic medical center. Our core mission is not to provide care for the indigent."

Anchor institution

The disagreement over the charity policy comes after the selection of UTMB to be the anchor institution for 16 counties in a [Regional Healthcare Partnership](#), part of a new plan that will make millions of federal dollars available to provide medical care for the uninsured and underinsured.

"A serious concern is that the wide discretion that (UTMB) uses to accept or deny patients and the lack of accountability and transparency will prevent patients from receiving appropriate medical care in an even wider region," the report said.

Reyes said UTMB will facilitate the program for the counties using its own resources. "We are not really in control," he said.

The charity policy negotiations stalled last month after UTMB posted a slightly altered version of its policy on its website without consulting the negotiators for the two groups.

"Personally, there was definitely some feelings of betrayal there," said [A.J. Halvorsen](#), spokeswoman for Gulf Coast Interfaith and the Galveston County Free Care Monitoring Project. "Are we just being pushed into the corner and trying to be made fools of here?"

'Charity' included

The name of the policy was changed to include the word charity, the only suggestion adopted by UTMB, Halvorsen said. The only other change was the addition to the posted policy of two provisions already in use but only known internally.

The negotiations began after [Joe Compian](#), a negotiator for Gulf Coast Interfaith, contacted UTMB Vice President Dr. [Ben Raimer](#) in February. UTMB declined to make Raimer available for comment.

Negotiations began in earnest in late March or early April and ended in late May.

