

My Turn

We've got a good hospital, let's support it

Charles Roberts

The Taos News, 2/8/2018

I was worried about our hospital.

Not so much anymore.

Like anybody who reads the local news, over the past few weeks I became very concerned about the future of Holy Cross Hospital. After all, having a good, local medical center was one of the key reasons we and many others chose Taos as a great place to live.

Stories have included layoffs, difficulty in meeting future payrolls, and a major gap between incoming revenue and outgoing expenses. Plus, the hospital has been hit with some serious, out-of-the-blue surprises, such as a bill for nearly \$700,000 for Medicare "overpayments" from five years ago and an unexpected \$600,000 rise in malpractice insurance premiums.

Plus there's controversial talk of using county funds scheduled for plant maintenance and improvements to meet short-term payroll obligations.

Digging into the situation with hospital management and physicians, I learned that like many rural hospitals, there is indeed a serious current cash flow problem.

But after listening to the experts, it seems to me from my long business experience, that the problem is most likely a short-term one.

I say this because a great deal of offsetting good news is also coming out of Holy Cross right now and more coming just around the corner.

First, Medicare last summer designated and upgraded Holy Cross as a critical access hospital. Among other things, this is designed to increase the hospital's visibility with Medicare and both speed up and increase payment size. This new "critical access" designation, management says, shows great promise. But for the first five months of transition, it unexpectedly turned into a bureaucratic nightmare that virtually stopped all Medicare billing and income, Holy Cross's lifeblood.

Imagine trying to run a business where you couldn't bill your biggest income generator (Medicare and Medicaid, in this case) for months on end.

Hopefully, now with this new system more firmly in place and newly updated information technology software becoming functional, much of the hospital's cash-flow problems will be solved.

Second, if you look carefully at Holy Cross financials, you see that money owed now to the hospital (receivables) actually exceeds what the hospital owes (payables) by nearly 100 percent.

That's some \$7 million on the plus side even with those nasty surprises mentioned above. And though Holy Cross still has on-going payroll and bank credit lines to pay back, it actually was slightly profitable in December on paper at least.

Third, important people are making themselves heard.

Rep. Ben Ray Lujan, for one, is actively working to make sure Holy Cross is widely recognized now as a critical access hospital and get past due claims paid in full by early February.

Fourth, cash issues notwithstanding, Taos residents should be very proud that Holy Cross is getting raves and recognition from its peers for the quality of its health services. The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services just awarded the hospital (now Medical Center) its highest possible 5-Star rating for outcomes related to safety, quality and patient experience.

This rating is based on a cumulative score from 57 different health-care criteria and ranks us at the very top 5 percent for hospital quality nationwide.

Only one other hospital in New Mexico has achieved such honors and it's nowhere near Taos.

Further, just this month, seven surveyors from the prestigious College of American Pathologists made an unannounced visit to review the services provided by the hospital laboratory. While some improvements were suggested, the overall rating for the department was pronounced "excellent" with no negative findings related to patient care services.

Holy Cross also recently received a Health Insight award from the New Mexico Department of Health for excellence in patient outcomes.

The mammography group also just passed a key FDA inspection citing "no deficiencies" in its system or policies.

And the hospital remains fully accredited for high-quality health services by the National Institute of American Health Organizations for an eighth consecutive year.

In short, my limited research with those in the know, not only eased my concerns about Holy Cross Medical Center staying healthy itself, it inspired me.

We are so lucky to have such an outstanding, dedicated, full-service health- services provider right here in Taos. Sure they have serious (hopefully short-term) money problems.

But they are openly transparent about it on their website and Facebook and seem to be doing a lot of things right.

Most of all, they are taking good care of us and getting recognized for it. It can't be easy depending on government services, largess and speed these days. All insurance companies, and especially Medicare and Medicaid, clearly want more for less.

But we do too. We want our health care to be good and close, not 50 miles away. Local is a necessity, not a luxury.

Please help support Holy Cross in any way you can.