

My Turn

Patten leads troubled hospital well, makes tough choices

By Bob Bresnahan

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A few years ago, my wonderful wife came home from her job at Holy Cross and said the new CEO said something she really liked.

Bill Patten told assembled staff that every employee of the hospital from physicians to the janitors played an important part in delivering healthcare to our community. Everyone's contribution is valuable, and employees should give each other the support they deserve.

Hearing this I thought, "We've got a good one." The new CEO addressed one of the hospital's problems: morale and teamwork. Since then I haven't really been disappointed in Bill Patten's performance. A friend who frequently talks about the hospital in contributions in My Turn told me recently that he agreed.

Patten is an excellent communicator. He publishes monthly videos on the hospital's website addressing urgent issues.

For example, he spoke about the shift to a "critical access" designation and its financial benefits in a clear fashion that even I could understand. When employees and others expressed concerns about harming low-income members of the community, Bill took them seriously and slowed down the transition until he'd satisfactorily addressed the issue.

A few weeks ago, a My Turn entitled "Bad Choices Lead to Hospital's Financial Woes" appeared in these pages. My thought was that the title and the article had things backward.

"Financial Problems Lead to Tough Decisions at Holy Cross" is much more accurate. An example of a tough decision driven by lack of finances was replacing the hospital information system with a less expensive system from Evident.

Naturally, Evident lacks some of the features available from Meditech, but it costs about one-third as much. This necessary decision bore one of the hallmarks of Holy Cross's current leadership: it reduces infrastructure costs without reducing staff involved inpatient services.

Systems development and management was my profession, and I learned that such changes are difficult. Early in my consulting days I formulated Rule No. 1: Never go backward. The reason is that systems changes are hard enough without feeling that you are losing functionality with a new system.

If users feel they must work harder to accomplish the same things, it damages morale. On the other hand, complex systems frequently offer a lot more than meets the eye, and a strong implementation team can make things even better if they have proper support.

Although the decision to switch to Evident was a good one given the hospital's finances, undoubtedly execution errors were made in its implementation. I'm sure Bill and his management team could fill several hours chronicling things they might have done differently.

The important thing is acknowledging problems and figuring out how to address them. By doing that Holy Cross can end up ahead even given the problems encountered in the transition.

Holy Cross needs our support, not only well-wishes but concrete financial support. We know how important Holy Cross is to our community. It's a major contributor to our economic as well as our physical health.

Taos County should take the lead in allocating funds to support the hospital and the community's health. Either new tax revenues need to be raised or old revenues need to be reallocated.

Holy Cross's financial problems didn't begin with Bill Patten. I attended a couple of meetings in 2013 when the hospital's financial shortfalls were the sole point on the agenda.

If memory serves me, four New Mexico rural hospitals were closed in those years. Our entire health care system is in trouble, and that's the context of Holy Cross's problems.

The United States has the highest health care prices and the lowest patient outcomes of the advanced countries. We lead in personal bankruptcies caused by runaway medical bills and trail far behind in infant and mother fatality. The current administration in Washington is doing everything in its power to undermine the Affordable Care Act, which was the first bit of progress on national health care policy in recent years.

In summary, the hospital's financial problems precede Bill Patten's arrival. He's made real progress by switching to "critical access" and its higher rate of compensation. Tough decisions are forced on the hospital, and, in some cases, spotty execution makes things worse.

It is true, some hospital staff are critical of leadership, but it is also true that many others support them. Hospital leadership acknowledges problems in its monthly reports and works hard to overcome them. And, we can do our part by stepping in with financial support. Let's do it.

Bresnahan lives in Taos.

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