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County hikes room rates at Valley Medical Center

By Mark Helfen
Knight Ridder

A one-day stay at Santa Clara County's public hospital, Valley Medical Center, can cost a patient up to \$12,873, after county officials approved a 10 percent hike in hospital room rates.

The Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors unanimously approved the change Tuesday but the overall cost of a stay at the hospital is still the lowest among hospitals in the entire county, said Kim Robertson, acting director for the Santa Clara Valley Health and Hospital System.

Private rooms are \$3,423 a day.

The most costly new charges are for traumatic brain and spinal cord injuries at \$7,818 a day, trauma care at \$11,443 a day, and burn care with a daily charge of \$12,873.

Officials said what matters most is not the daily rate, but the total cost of a stay in the hospital.

"A hospital is not a hotel. Nobody goes to the hospital and orders ala carte," Robertson said, but keeping with the food analogy orders a full course.

"We are the lowest cost in the county," Robertson said.

Robertson based her determination on comparison data from the Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development. The data show that the overall cost for a stay at Valley Medical Center in 2005 was \$8,128 a day, still the cheapest in the county. The average for the county was \$11,735 a day.

At the high end for Santa Clara County is Stanford Hospital, at \$19,868 a day, with complex and costly procedures such as organ transplants factored in.

El Camino Hospital in Mountain View would be the next lowest priced care in the county. It is also supported by tax dollars drawn from a special taxing district. The 2005 state data shows El Camino's overall daily costs at \$747 higher than the county hospital, even though the room rate is less than the county public hospital at \$2,918 a day.

Very few patients at the county hospital pay the full rates Robertson said. There is a sliding scale of charges for county residents whose incomes are no more than three times the federal poverty definition, under a program called Ability to Pay Determination.

The arrangement includes a co-pay with a fixed charge for each visit or stay in the hospital.

"The idea is make it predictable to the patient," Robertson said. "The vast majority of our patients are very low income."

But the county gives a better price to people who pay up front, or will pay quickly.

"We have the ability to negotiate," Robertson said.

The county hospital increases reflects the "weird" way health care finances work Robertson said.

"Insurance companies assume that we will increase rates," she said. Without increasing the "list prices" each year the reimbursement the hospital gets from private insurers and state welfare medical coverage would decrease. The increases will keep the reimbursement at the same level as last year Robertson said.

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