



Heidi Huber / The Fresno Bee

Dr. John Martin talks with Annie Glaspie about her mother, Allie Clemmer, 93, of Hanford in the emergency room of Hanford Community Medical Center, one of six central San Joaquin Valley hospitals that contract with California Emergency Physicians to provide services for their emergency departments.

## **In case of EMERGENCY, contract out Valley hospitals are turning to large companies to staff and oversee their emergency departments.**

**By Tracy Correa / The Fresno Bee**

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An increasing number of central San Joaquin Valley hospitals are turning to large companies to staff and oversee their emergency departments.

It's not a solution embraced by big hospitals in Fresno, but administrators at smaller hospitals in the region say it's working for them.

For example, Selma Community Hospital owners credit a Bay Area-based company with helping to cut down emergency room wait times by about 40 minutes.

Adventist Health has seen such good results at Selma that it recently contracted with the company -- California Emergency Physicians, or CEP -- to oversee and staff its emergency-room operations at two of its other hospitals in nearby Hanford this year.

All hospitals contract with physicians groups to serve patients in their emergency rooms because they are prohibited from employing doctors directly. However, an increasing number -- especially smaller operations that have a difficult time recruiting qualified doctors -- are turning to large companies to assume responsibility for what has become the busiest and often the most burdened part of a hospital.

Compared to other hospital departments, said CEP President Dr. Wesley Curry, "it's much more complex to staff and run an ER."

The companies take over what are often crowded emergency departments and assume responsibility for physician staffing, billing and training. They promise major operational improvements.

CEP has contracts with more than 50 hospitals statewide and in 2005 began adding hospitals outside the state in Arizona, Georgia and Oregon.

Other companies that provide staffing and management for hospital emergency rooms include EmCare, Emergency Medical Consultants Inc. and Janzen Johnston Rockwell, a Southern California company that at one time staffed the two Hanford hospitals.

But Emeryville-based CEP -- around since 1975 -- and companies like it are attracting more attention as they add clients and expand through mergers that have provided more contracting clout.

Typically, CEP and other similar companies enlist local emergency doctors as members of the group and work with them to run emergency departments. However, they also can bring in their own doctors or recruit from outside the community. Their size provides them with a measure of recruiting clout and resources that a smaller hospital may lack.

Doctors in some markets -- accustomed to the old system of independent contractors -- are not always overjoyed when forced to affiliate with a big outside company if they want to continue working their local emergency room shifts.

And larger hospitals often don't need them.

Dr. Patrick Marabella, chief medical officer at Saint Agnes Medical Center, said it would be difficult to persuade Saint Agnes to contract with one of these large companies for emergency services.

He said the whole idea of outside management doesn't appeal to him when he can walk down the hall to talk to the chief of his emergency room if he has a problem.

"This works for us, this local group," he said.

But as small rural hospitals increasingly struggle to attract qualified staff and improve quality, more are pursuing such contracts.

CEP now counts six central San Joaquin Valley hospitals as clients: Adventist-owned Selma, Central Valley General Hospital in Hanford and Hanford Community Medical Center; Madera Community Hospital; Kaweah Delta Hospital in Visalia; and Sierra View District Hospital in Porterville.

Kendall Fults, vice president of ambulatory services for Adventist's three hospitals in Selma and Hanford, said the arrangement has worked out well as the hospital focuses on improving emergency services. Fults would not reveal financial details of the deal.

"One of the reasons we went with CEP is they are throughout the Valley. They already have a network of Valley-based physicians," he said.

He said CEP insists on a high level of training for its doctors, which benefits hospitals. CEP pushes for doctors board-certified in emergency medicine, a specialized level of training.

Dr. Dan Culhane, Central California regional director for CEP, said the company is established in the region, where it landed an early contract nearly three decades ago with Sierra View District Hospital. Sierra View officials would not comment for this story because the hospital is in contract negotiations with CEP.

CEP added four new hospital clients in 2005, four more in 2006 and five more so far this year. The company is providing emergency physician services to 62 emergency departments and almost 2.5 million patients annually -- up from fewer than 1 million patients in 1994.

Culhane said the company is trying to slow down enlistment of new ones so that it can concentrate on current clients.

Local Adventist officials said CEP has proven its worth in 10 years of overseeing emergency services in Selma. And they said CEP's Rapid Medical Evaluation program has improved on the time it takes for a patient to get from arrival to a bed -- from 62 minutes to 23 minutes. Adventist expects similar results at its Hanford hospitals.

Under the same program, Madera Community Hospital saw the time it takes an emergency patient to see a health-care provider decrease from 34 minutes to 8 minutes. The company also said patient satisfaction increased even as patient volume rose.

Curry, CEP's president, said hospitals need help when they turn to his company.

"The main reason hospitals come to CEP is because they don't believe their current physician group is performing," he said. "Sometimes it's a single local group of physicians or another company."

He said emergency rooms are the most likely place a hospital makes a first impression on a patient. "Any hospital serious about gaining and maintaining market share has got to have an effective emergency department that runs smoothly," Curry said.

Curry said CEP, unlike many in its sector, is physician-owned. The private company has more than 900 physician partners and enlists doctors in new markets who can ultimately become partners.

The company pays its doctors and handles their patient billing and malpractice insurance.

Saint Agnes Medical Center in Fresno and Community Medical Centers continue to staff their ERs through local groups.

Community contracts with Regional Emergency Medical Group -- made up of private-practice and University of California, San Francisco faculty doctors -- to cover emergency services at its downtown Fresno and Clovis hospitals.

Saint Agnes has contracted for more than a decade with Fresno-based North Fresno Emergency Physicians Medical Group.

Dr. Stephen Soldo, president of the North Fresno group and chairman of the emergency medicine department at Saint Agnes, said there are benefits to working with a local group.

"With local physicians, there is more control over the physicians group, more flexibility. The physicians in a local group tend to be more dedicated to the community, with ties to the community and to medical staff," Soldo said.

North Fresno Emergency Physicians has about 20 doctors, most of whom are board-certified or on their way to becoming board-certified in emergency medicine.

Soldo said Saint Agnes has been lucky because it has been able to draw on skilled doctors who are affiliated with UCSF, which has a medical education program in Fresno, and whose former residents often settle here.

But smaller, rural hospitals have a tougher time recruiting physicians to staff emergency rooms, he said.

Marabella, chief medical officer at Saint Agnes, said he understands why some smaller hospitals in rural locations might find services provided by companies such as CEP attractive. He called it a matter of economics.

"It's tough to recruit to Madera."



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*Dr. John Martin listens to Stratford resident Bartolo Cervantes' breathing in the emergency room of Hanford Community Medical Center, one of six central San Joaquin Valley hospitals that contract with California Emergency Physicians to provide emergency services.*



*Dr. John Martin looks at a patient's leg in the emergency room of Hanford Community Medical Center, one of six Valley hospitals that contract services with California Emergency Physicians.*