

Last OB-GYN doctor resigns from RMCHCS

Written by By Beth Blakeman Managing Editor
Friday, 08 October 2021 04:36



Women's Health Unit closes, temporarily

RMCHCS is losing doctors and they're not asking why.

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Dr. Hannah Palm, who has been at Rehoboth McKinley Christian Health Care Services for less than a year, said she didn't feel safe or heard. She believed the hospital was not well-staffed on the nurse or physician side in order to provide safe patient care, and found it difficult to work with the current administration.

When she announced her plan to leave, she said she was reminded of the lack of support she experienced previously at the hospital, by the actions of a single member of the administration, the only one who talked to her about it, who called her decision a "bummer," and then asked her to help fill empty positions with traveling nurses and locums (people who temporarily fulfill the duties of others).

She said when she announced her resignation no one from the administration questioned her decision or asked if there was anything that might make her change her mind.

So, in addition to saying goodbye to patients and helping them find nearby facilities where they can go to deliver their babies, and assisting in arranging their transport, Palm is now helping RMCHCS to fill her own post, and that of the latest labor and delivery nurse to resign.

Another reason Palm said she decided to leave was because her mentor, Dr. Andrea Walker, resigned. At that point she felt she no longer had anyone to help with complex patient situations.

Those resignations meant RMCHCS had to close its Women's Health Unit at 1902 Red Rock Dr. for the time being. Expectant mothers needing treatment are now being directed to the hospital emergency room or told to contact their primary OB-GYN doctors.

But that is only one of the repercussions of the resignation of the last OB-GYN doctor at RMCHCS.

For Dr. Neil Jackson and his wife the change has meant rearranging plans for delivery of the couple's first baby.

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It's added a layer of stress to the pregnancy. It means they would have to leave the area and all the people they have been working with in preparation for the birth. They have to find another place to have the baby in another city, maybe as far away as Albuquerque. Jackson said it means they probably can't take their doula with them and transportation could be difficult, even dangerous.

"We found out about this two days before our due date," he said.

Jackson said going through this is making him painfully aware of what it is like for some of his patients. He is hoping for there to be a shared plan to keep labor and delivery open at the hospital to maintain stability for pregnant patients.

Jackson, a family practice physician who has worked in the primary care and prenatal clinics, performed labor and delivery and has a concentration in obstetrics, said the hospital went from having four OB-GYN providers to having only two. Now the last of those providers is leaving.

Palm is the last OB-GYN at the hospital now and she's only staying until her contract ends in December. With the Women's Health Unit closed and the resignation of the last labor and delivery nurse, Palm is the lone OB-GYN doctor at the hospital and she's now working in the ER and is only supposed to help out with emergency deliveries.

"We're able to address any emergency, but when a patient comes in [to the ER] in labor, especially because of COVID and the national nursing shortage, it can take several hours to arrange [for them to go to] another hospital," Palm said.

However, they haven't lost any babies because of the current situation.

Things are up in the air at the family medicine residency program, too. It offers a general curriculum to train doctors, in hopes that they will stay and provide rural health care in the area.

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“They need labor and delivery experience for that program ... or they need to search it out in the area — or the training program would need to be re-established elsewhere,” Palm pointed out.

However, RMCHCS leadership seems confident that the OB-GYN vacancies will not be a problem.

Speaking on behalf of the hospital, interim CEO Don Smithburg said, “the hospital is constantly recruiting new doctors ... that is the nature of small, rural hospitals.”

He believes the OB-GYN doctor and nurse shortage will be resolved by the end of October.

The hospital is already looking for traveling nurses and doctors and permanent obstetrics staff replacements.

“We have about 130 doctors attached to the institution,” he said. “There was one released in July and there are a couple of others who have resigned.

“They’re loud when they leave the institution. That is a fact,” he said.

Some of those voices may be heard at a community town hall scheduled for Oct. 2 at the First United Methodist Church at 1800 Redrock Dr., #7000. The organizers want to address the state of patient care, women’s health, and services at RMCHCS.

Smithburg won’t be there and neither will any members of the hospital administration.

As far as he’s concerned the community town hall is a union-sponsored event —the union being

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the Union of American Physicians and Dentists.

To attend the meeting via Zoom, RSVP at uapd.com/rehoboth to receive the link, or check out the recording at KGLP.org.

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