

## **Grady needs to report diagnosis from federal agency**

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For Grady Memorial Hospital, the timing could not have been worse. The agency that hands out report cards to hospitals — the Joint Commission — showed up for an inspection tour on the same day as the governing board's last meeting, a drawn-out and contentious affair in which critics howled about proposed changes to the governing structure.

While that backdrop probably didn't help much as the commission members set about their five-day task, it wasn't their focus. They were evaluating the hospital's operations — most critically, patient care. And their answer? Grady is deficient, and its accreditation is at risk. The Joint Commission cited numerous "opportunities for improvement in various areas, including patient care."

For the struggling hospital, this is about as bad as it gets. For years, Grady has endured budget crises, management turnover and a culture of barely controlled chaos, but it has always enjoyed an excellent reputation for patient care. That is, in fact, its claim to fame — that it rises above its stretched resources to provide stellar medicine.

Apparently, though, administrative woes have begun to erode Grady's ability to heal the sick and mend the broken. If that isn't fixed — and soon — the historic Atlanta hospital could go the way of a similar facility in Los Angeles. Citing poor management and sloppy patient care, the Joint Commission jerked accreditation from Martin Luther King Jr.-Drew Medical Center in 2005. The hospital failed to rebound, and it was finally closed earlier this year.

So far, hospital officials have refused to disclose details of the commission's findings. That's a mistake. The hospital's governing board, the Fulton-DeKalb Hospital Authority, as well as community advocates have vociferously insisted that Grady deserves substantially more taxpayer support, not only from the state but also from its charter counties, Fulton and DeKalb. That's true. Grady is an important resource, providing routine care to indigent patients, trauma care for North Georgia and education for about a quarter of the state's physicians.

But any increased taxpayer support — indeed, even the current level of public funding — demands transparency. Board members and hospital administrators cannot expect taxpayers to pay more while they are withholding critical information about the hospital's current condition. That's especially true now, when Grady's future is the subject of intense public debate. Hospital officials should release details of Grady's deficiencies immediately.

Next, the Hospital Authority should speed up the process of turning over management to a nonprofit, nonpolitical board. While the authority finally voted for a new governing structure, it laid out a circuitous path that demands guarantees of funding from taxpayers and charitable organizations. If those demands were intended to open negotiations for increased funding, then hospital authority members should start those negotiations before the year ends.

There is no doubt that Grady needs more money to improve patient care. The hospital has languished for a long time with outdated medical equipment, some of which is barely holding together. Its laboratories need to be retrofitted. It also needs newer patient tracking and billing systems.

But poor management also contributes to shoddy medicine. A meddling and micromanaging hospital authority still has not learned that its job is to set policy, not to manage Grady's day-to-day operations. As just one example, the hospital's chief medical officer, Dr. Curtis Lewis, reports directly to the authority, not to CEO Otis Story.

That convoluted arrangement places the physician responsible for overseeing patient care under the hospital's board of directors, who are in no position to mandate appropriate medical standards. While Story has appealed to the hospital authority to change the position to report to the CEO — just as his predecessors did — the hospital authority has refused. No wonder patient care has suffered.

With its tentative vote to turn over management to a nonprofit, nonpolitical board, the Fulton-DeKalb Hospital Authority has taken a huge step in the right direction. It just needs to step faster.