

Decision to remove Catholic designation from St. Elizabeth Hospital announced

In response to months of controversy and community division surrounding a tubal ligation policy, Humboldt's Catholic hospital will be turned over to the Saskatoon health region as a publicly-run facility.

St. Elizabeth's Hospital board of directors and the Saskatoon Regional Health Authority recommended the change to Saskatchewan health minister Len Taylor March 6, after a poll indicated a majority of residents in the area do not want a Catholic hospital.

The change will take place as soon as legal, financial and legislative details can be addressed, possibly by the end of this year, said Darlene Eberle, chair of the Saskatoon Regional Health Authority. Until the transfer is complete, the hospital will continue to operate as a Catholic facility guided by the Catholic Health Care Ethics Guide.

The board and the region are committed to working together to ensure the transition will be as smooth as possible, said Eberle.

"This has been an extremely emotional and divisive issue for Humboldt and the surrounding area. We now want to get on with planning the new hospital and healing some of the hurts that have been caused by this controversy," she said. The region has no plans for staff changes as a result of the transition, she added.

St. Elizabeth's board chair Jerome Strasser expressed pride in the service that the hospital has provided through the years. "We appreciate the legacy of compassion and inclusion left by the Sisters of St. Elizabeth," he said in a news release. "We know that many people in our communities will share our sadness that, after next year, the hospital will no longer be Catholic."

Bishop Albert LeGatt shared that reaction. "There is a sadness that a long tradition of health services and of caring fed by the Catholic faith will no longer find an institutional expression as a Catholic hospital," he said, adding that he recognizes that the St. Elizabeth's board worked very hard with the Saskatoon Health Authority to find a resolution to the ongoing controversy in the community.

In moving forward, the bishop said there is a need for healing, forgiveness and reconciliation. It is also a time for reflecting on the legacy of the Catholic hospital, of the Sisters of St. Elizabeth, and of the staff, he said.

"That legacy exists in the relationships that the sisters have built up over the years within the staff and within the larger community," LeGatt described. "The legacy is in the values implanted in the human heart that will continue to be lived out – although, sadly, no longer within a Catholic institution."

This spirit of caring and compassion towards the sick and the suffering will be carried on by individuals, including staff members at the hospital, and by parish communities as a whole. It will continue to be lived out in families, among neighbors and within communities, as well as in the active role taken in future spiritual care offered at the hospital, the bishop said.

As part of discussions about the transfer of the hospital to the region, the Catholic hospital board asked for funded spiritual care positions and infrastructure to be included in the new facility, said Rod Donlevy, a consultant and spokesman for the board.

In the recommendation to the health minister about the changeover, the board and the region asked “that spiritual care at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital continue to be provided and that Saskatoon Health Region spiritual care services be reviewed, enhanced and supported throughout the health region.”

Eberle noted that a multi-faith chapel will be built within the new hospital and added that spiritual care is provided within all hospitals in the region.

The decision to remove the hospital’s Catholic designation was taken in response to a particular local situation and has no implications for other faith-based affiliates in the region or the province, said Eberle. A number of nursing homes and St. Paul’s Hospital in Saskatoon operate as faith-based facilities in collaboration with the Saskatoon Regional Health Authority.

The debate over Catholic health care in Humboldt began last year, when the local hospital board addressed non-compliance to a policy forbidding sterilization for the purpose of contraception. In response to breaches in the Catholic policy surrounding tubal ligations, the hospital board first stopped the procedure altogether, and later introduced a revised policy citing the Catholic Health Care Ethics Guide.

Two doctors resigned in protest, and the issue has been hotly debated in the communities served by the hospital, and addressed in petitions and letters. At rallies held in support of the doctors, it was argued that individual rights should take priority over religious beliefs in an institution supported by tax dollars. In response, the board and the health region issued an information fact sheet and then commissioned a national research firm to measure public opinion on the question of hospital governance.

The firm’s Feb. 23-25 poll surveyed residents living in approximately 40 communities served by St. Elizabeth’s Hospital. Among 977 people polled, 69 per cent said they wanted the hospital to operate under the Saskatoon health region, 19 per cent said the hospital should continue to operate as a Catholic facility with its own board of directors, and 12 per cent did not know or refused to answer.

The Catholic hospital was established in Humboldt by the Franciscan congregation of the Sisters of St. Elizabeth who came to the area in 1911. The first St. Elizabeth’s Hospital building was completed in 1912, and was replaced with the existing building in 1955. Tenders for a new hospital building will be issued this spring.