

Hospitals find themselves increasingly short of beds

By GAIL McCARTHY
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The question of whether a hospital bed will be there when residents need one will be the topic of a presentation tomorrow evening by a Boston University professor who has researched hospital mergers and closings for 25 years.

Professor Alan Sager, part of the School of Public Health, School of Medicine, will give a talk titled "Before it's too late: Making sure a hospital bed is there when you need it." The event will be held Aug. 25 at 7 p.m. at Gloucester High School.

"The work that Alan Sager and his colleagues have done is very relevant to Gloucester and the entire North Shore because he has discovered that at certain times of the year, particularly in the

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winter, there are an inadequate number of beds for people needing them around the state," said Gloucester registered nurse Margaret O'Malley.

Sager holds a bachelor's of arts degree in economics from Brandeis University and a doctoral degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in city and regional planning, specializing in health care.

In a recent study, Sager said Massachusetts could face a 3,063-bed shortfall as soon as next year due to consolidations within the hospital industry and the steady growth in the number of patients needing hospital care on a given day.

"Baby Boomers are closing in on 55 and that's when uses of hospitals begin accelerating," he said. "The need is growing and the supply of beds is dropping."

The solution is for lawmakers to require more regulation and public scrutiny of hospital mergers and closings, he said in a recent telephone interview.

Sager said the issue pivots around the question that if more hospital beds are going to be needed, what should be done now.

"Should we just let hospitals close or cut back because they are being financially suffocated or should we act to provide

them with more oxygen," he said. "If more beds are needed in the future, where should those beds be? Do we really want no hospital care available on Cape Ann, because that may be where we're heading. What if other hospitals start closing?"

Like hospitals across the state and nation, Addison Gilbert Hospital merged with its larger neighbor, Beverly Hospital, in 1994.

Across the state, Sager said there's an issue about how many patients need hospital beds.

"But if there's a lot of beds in Springfield and Boston, it doesn't do much good for people in Cape Ann," he said. "We have so many competent doctors and nurses.

We've got the talent to keep open every hospital that's needed and there is enough

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money to do it." Sager points out that there is some \$12 billion spent on hospital care statewide — and some \$36 billion on health care overall — enough to pay for everyone's health care.

But state policy has abdicated decisions about how many hospitals are needed, how many beds are needed and where they should be located to market forces, he said. "The challenge is to ask someone in the state to find out which hospitals are in financial trouble such that they would be forced to close. There are early warning signals."

Sager believes that as long as a hospital is operating efficiently and is vital to health care of people in the area, then it should be able to qualify for some kind of special relief, he explained to illustrate one possible approach to keep hospitals afloat.

The fate of Cape Ann's hospital depends on many factors, Sager said. "Can the city and town make a difference by themselves? Can Northeast make a difference by itself? Can state government make a difference? What combination of efforts can make a difference to guarantee the survival of Addison Gilbert?"

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of Public Health, which focuses on affordable health care. Sager and his colleague Deborah Socolar are the directors of the project.

Wednesday's presentation is sponsored by a number of organizations on the North Shore: Partners for Addison Gilbert Hospital, Cape Ann Sustainable Community, Massachusetts Nurses Association - District 4, Essex County Community Organization, League of Women Voters of Cape Ann, Lynn Community Health Center and Lynn Health Task Force.

O'Malley said another valuable

component to Sager's work is that he provides the tools that citizens need to use to correct the system.

Bernadine Young, a coordinator of Cape Ann Sustainable Community, said her organization believes the health care and well being of its citizens is very important.

"It's well worth spending some time getting together to talk about it," Young said. "We appreciate an expert coming to our town and we encourage residents to attend and learn more about what's happening in the health care field."