

One thing still unchanged at NL clinic: demand

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New London — Appointments are backing up, phone calls still are not answered promptly and one-third of the original staff — including some of the top people — is gone. But dental care has expanded, a full-time social worker is on board and bilingual nurses are fielding medical inquiries.

Six months after being taken over by Community Health Center, the city's medical and dental clinic has undergone monumental changes, ranging from the installation of a new computer system to the resignation of its medical director.

One thing hasn't changed, though, said Maria Montanaro, the center's director: "The demand still far outstrips the capacity to serve."

Staff members like pediatrician Dr. Lourdes Rosales say that problem probably is a consequence of the recession and defense cuts. She said she sees far more clients a day now than she did when she started more than four years ago.

The dental clinic's hours have more than doubled, from 36 hours a week to 76, with two dentists and a dental hygienist staffing it. Still, Ms. Mon-

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tanaro said, "the demand is overwhelming."

Dental appointments are booked into June.

"We keep adding," she said, "and they keep coming."

The private, non-profit Community Health Center offers a wide range of services, including full dental and primary medical care for all ages. The city health department ran the clinic, called Expanded Health Services, from its creation in 1972 until last October, when it was privatized. Based in the Richard R. Martin Center on Broad Street, it has been operated as a joint venture with Lawrence & Memorial Hospital since 1988, with clinicians from the hospital staffing the clinic.

CHC, which is based in Middletown, plans to absorb all payroll costs by April 1994. When it took over the clinic last fall, CHC offered all 18 employees the choice of staying on board. Twelve are still with CHC, which now has a total of 25 employees.

Three clerical workers opted to continue working for the city, and staff dentist Dr. Kate Lindberg resigned for "philosophical reasons," Ms. Montanaro said. She said she did not know more than that, and Lindberg could not be reached for comment.

Two others have left since then.

Dr. William Murray, an internal medicine physician, retired in December, and medical director Dr. Steven Edelman resigned in January to take a job with Uncas on Thames Hospital in Norwich.

Edelman, director of community health programs for the hospital, said he left on good terms with CHC and plans to continue "a good collegial relationship" with the center.

When he joined the clinic in 1988, Edelman's goal was to "put together a viable system and keep it going," he said. "With CHC coming in, I had pretty much fulfilled my initial goals... I felt it was in good hands, and it was time for me to move on."

The vacant positions are being covered by several other clinicians, and CHC is hiring replacements. Ms. Montanaro said. Two dental positions, a social worker, a pediatrician, a nurse and administrative staff positions have been added, she said.

Edelman said there is "clearly a new management style" under CHC, but he said it is too early to say whether it is better or worse than under the city-run clinic.

"Any new organization needs to work itself out and establish itself with the employees and the public," he said.

One way to do that, Ms. Mon-

tanaro said, is offer round-the-clock call-in service so that patients can get medical advice 24 hours a day. She said she hopes CHC can provide that service soon.

"I can call my pediatrician at 2 in the morning if I have a problem," she said. "Our patients deserve nothing less."

CHC also wants to try to move into a bigger office in the next year and eventually provide affordable primary health care for the entire region, Ms. Montanaro said. Now, CHC provides care for New London residents only, and Ms. Montanaro said she is concerned about the lack of affordable health care in places like Groton and Norwich.

Every day, CHC answers dozens of calls from residents of other towns, she said, but all the center can do is refer them to other places.

"They're basically turned away," she said. There is one exception. Because CHC has a grant from the Area Agency on Aging, elderly people from anywhere in the region can get dental care at the center.

If CHC did not turn away out-of-towners, New London clients would have to wait in line behind non-residents, Ms. Montanaro said. "We can't, in good conscience, open our doors to another one or two thousand people," she said.

Recruitment and retention of clinicians continues to be another problem for CHC, as it does for any community-based clinic.

"There is a need for people... to do primary care," said Barbara Pokorny, a family nurse practitioner who has been with the clinic for five years. "And people who do enter (family practice) want to see upper middle-class — people who, from our perspective, are easy to take care of."

One success that several CHC staffers point to is the hiring of a full-time social worker, who treats the social roots of medical problems.

A doctor may discover that a child with bronchitis is part of a family that lives in substandard housing with no heat, Ms. Montanaro said. Without someone to look into that problem and help alleviate it, medical problems will return, she said.

A few patients waiting at CHC in the Martin Center on a recent afternoon said they haven't noticed any marked changes since last October. Two other patients, though, complained to The Day recently that they have to make appointments far in advance and that their phone calls are not answered promptly.

Ms. Montanaro said CHC is adjusting to a new phone system, which was installed a week ago.