

## When The Bottom Line Is Red... Watch Out!

In a news release dated September 11, 1984, Cape Cod Hospital announced that "patient days for the months of July, August and September are down by 2,000." Right off the bat, you can't help wondering how the hospital can know its patient-day census for September when two-thirds of the month still lies in the misty future. Perhaps some members of the hospital's Board of Trustees are clairvoyant.

In any case, partly because of the patient-day loss, according to the press release, and partly because of the wage increase won by the nurses in arbitration, the trustees voted to close Whitcomb Pavilion and reduce the hospital's work force by 140 full-time equivalents. No mention is made of wage increases awarded other hospital staff; only the nurses are singled out as the reason.

Of the many possible internal factors that might bear upon its financial situation, the hospital holds only the nurses responsible. One could interpret the hospital's position as open admission that only by underpaying its nursing staff was it breaking even in the past.

Those who have watched Cape Cod Hospital grow over the past 60 years (from a wooden Victorian-style residence converted to hospital use in 1924 to the three-story brick edifice that today impacts the southeast corner of Hyannis) know that the hospital has sought some graceful way to rid itself of Whitcomb Pavilion for years. Had the facility not carried the name of generous benefactors, now deceased, disposal could have been accomplished much earlier. Even now rumors fly that Whitcomb Pavilion is being sold to a neighboring long-term-care facility.

More to the point in the hospital's news release is the concluding line referring to "the incredible financial constraints caused by Chapter 372."

This seems to be where the trouble really lies. If, as has

been reported, Blue Cross is denying reimbursement to the hospital on the basis of disapproval of payments for care already delivered, the hospital is, indeed, in difficulty. So, too, are 44 patients in the 58 bed facility called Whitcomb Pavilion which, many of us are aware, has served as a "holding tank" for patients who, according to Daniel Fern, chairman of the hospital's board of trustees, "don't belong in the hospital."

In order to be eligible for Medicare coverage while in a nursing home, guidelines require that a patient transfer directly from a hospital. To relieve incredible financial constraints (to borrow a phrase from the press release) upon families of victims of disabling chronic illnesses, kindly doctors have been known to admit patients to the hospital for a few days before transferring them to nursing homes. Often hospitalization has been necessary for a short time but, when no longer medically necessary, no nursing home space has been available. Hospital stays have stretched from a few days to a few weeks...even a few months sometimes. Patients awaiting nursing home space were housed in Whitcomb Pavilion. Medicare was billed. Medicare paid.

Blue Cross, under Chapter 372, is cracking down on the practice of using Whitcomb Pavilion as a holding tank and refusing to pay the hospital's charges. So Whitcomb Pavilion is to be closed. By eliminating the equivalent of 140 full time jobs, the hospital can reduce its overhead and get rid of some deadwood on its staff. Maybe even some vociferous nurses who expect to be paid wages commensurate with their training, the efforts they expend, and the responsibilities they carry, will be laid off.

It seems Mr. Fern is quite correct in stating that the patients of Whitcomb Pavilion "don't belong in the hospital." Not very compassionate, perhaps, but correct, nonetheless.