

Med center can resume its heart transplants

Hospital's program
suspended last year
amid financial crisis

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The Journal News

VALHALLA — Westchester Medical Center received state permission yesterday to restart its heart transplant program, which was suspended more than a year ago in the midst of the hospital's ongoing financial crisis.

"I think it's a great thing for Westchester Medical Center and quite frankly the patients we serve because we now can offer the full spectrum of cardiovascular services," Michael Israel, the medical center's interim president, said yesterday after receiving the approval letter from the state Health Department.

The first transplant will be at least a month away as the hospital makes sure its protocols are in place and then creates a waiting list of potential organ recipients.

"It can be within hours of the first listing or months because that is not entirely in our hands," said Dr. Steven Lansman, a transplant surgeon who is the head of cardiac surgery at the medical center. "What is in our hands (is) when we list the first patient, we're ready to go."

Lansman said he expected the hospital to do about six to eight transplants in the first calendar year of the program and then perhaps double that number the next year.

Heart failure patients waiting for a transplant may also be offered what are called mechanical assist devices that can keep a heart going until a new one becomes available.

With Westchester back online, there are now six active heart transplant programs in the state, including those at New

York-Presbyterian Hospital, Mount Sinai Hospital and Montefiore Medical Center, all in New York City.

Westchester Medical Center first won state approval to perform heart transplants in 1999, after a state committee had turned down its request, saying there were enough such programs in New York. The first transplant was performed at the end of 2001. Seven heart transplants were done in 2002 and 10 in 2003.

By June 2004, with the hospital in financial crisis and only two transplants done that year, administrators decided to temporarily suspend the program. Mary Brown, who was then interim hospital president, said at the time that there were not enough transplants being performed to financially justify their continuation.

Six months later, the hospital hired Lansman and another heart surgeon from Mount Sinai to restart the program. Lansman had done about 300 heart transplants at Mount Sinai since 1989.

Lansman said he received permission in May to restart the program from the United Network for Organ Sharing, which maintains the national waiting list of those in need of a transplant. The hospital asked the state Health Department for approval shortly after that.

Among the information the hospital had to provide to the Health Department was documentation of the program's financial feasibility, according to Robert Kenny, a department spokesman.

The medical center has lost more than \$200 million since 2001 and expects to lose about \$60 million this year.

Israel said the heart transplant program was among those that the medical center expected to bring in a surplus to help offset losses in other services, such as the burn center.

"We can take those dollars and use those dollars to reinvest back in the institution and obviously support those things that can't support themselves," he said.

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**"We now
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Michael Israel