

HEARTBREAKING



FILE PHOTO

Hosp kills life-saving program

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Christ Hospital in Jersey City will shut down its cardiac rehabilitation program by the end of the year.

The unit, which serves 25 patients on a regular basis, supervises and monitors cardiac patients as they perform heart-strengthening exercises.

Hospital officials said they are ending the program, staffed by one full-time and one part-time nurse, to save money, but declined to say how much money would be saved. Both nurses would be switched to other units, they said.



DYLAN WILSON JOURNAL PHOTO

OUT PATIENTS: From left, Leo Stemer, Ken Potthoff, James D'Arrigo, Glenn Albro and Martin Bressler pose for a portrait in the coffee shop at Christ Hospital, where their cardiac rehab program is being cut for budget reasons.

"There's a finite source of financial resources and we have to be diligent how we allocate it," said hospital spokeswoman Barbara Davey.

Half the patients in the program gathered in the hospital's cafeteria yesterday to say they are angry and scared.

"I think this (program) is why I'm alive today," said 87-year-old Leo Stemmer, who 15 years ago underwent open-heart surgery. "If I didn't exercise, I'd be dead."

The key to the program, the patients explained, is its heart monitoring component. Cardiac patients are instructed to exercise, but if they are not closely monitored they can easily overdo it.

"A couple of times I had to be sent to the emergency room, where I stayed for several days," said 74-year-old Ken Potthoff, a triple-bypass survivor. "Without this program, I don't know if I'd be here."

Most patients attend three two-hour sessions per week. Medicare pays roughly \$150 per session for the first 36 sessions, they said. After that, the hospital bills them \$47 a month directly for the thrice-weekly sessions, the patients said.

They would have gladly paid more, they said. And they praised Reina Vinas, the nurse who runs the program.

"Excellent," said Potthoff. "She gets 10 stars."

Both patients and hospital officials said last night there is no other program of this type for "maintenance" patients in Hudson County.

"We had surgery to heal our hearts, and they are being broken again — unnecessarily, I might add," said Mary T. Johnson, who six years ago had a triple-bypass operation.

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