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Health Care

Presbyterian saw declines in revenue, ER patients during Ebola crisis

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For the first time Wednesday, Texas Health Resources revealed the financial fallout from the Ebola cases at its Dallas flagship facility.

Revenue at Texas Health Presbyterian Hospital Dallas declined by a quarter and emergency room visits dropped by half over the first 20 days of October, according to a disclosure related to the system revenue bonds of Arlington-based Texas Health.

Presbyterian Dallas admitted its first Ebola patient on Sept. 28, and two of the hospital's nurses contracted the deadly disease.

The disclosure also said that THR management believes the organization's insurance coverage is adequate for any liabilities.

"No legal claims have been filed to date," THR said.

Texas Health said it has "sufficient liquidity" to cover any losses that might exceed insurance limits and declines in business at Presbyterian.

Last week, Moody's Investors Service revised the outlook on Texas Health's long-term debt rating to developing from positive, reflecting "uncertainty on the system's long-term financial performance, impact on financial resources and litigation risk following recent cases of Ebola."

Presbyterian, about 8 miles from downtown just east of Central Expressway, accounted for roughly \$600 million of THR's systemwide \$3.8 billion in revenue in 2013.

Texas Health said its other facilities have not seen a decline in business related to the Ebola cases.

In its disclosure about Presbyterian, THR said:

Revenue declined \$8.1 million, or 25.6 percent.

ER visits declined by 2,336, or 53.3 percent.

Operating room surgeries declined about 165 cases, or 25 percent.

The daily census — the number of patients a day — dropped from 428 to 337, or 21.1 percent.

The filing compared activity for Oct. 1 through Monday with the hospital's business over the previous nine months, not the same period a year ago.

THR said the negative impact was primarily because Presbyterian's emergency department was placed on diversionary status from Oct. 12 to Monday. That means it didn't take ambulance cases. Physicians also transferred cases to other facilities.

As steep as the declines were, University of Texas at Dallas marketing and branding expert Abhijit Biswas said he thought they would have been even more pronounced.

"I'd expect business to be down by three-quarters," Biswas said in an interview. "Presbyterian should be relieved."

During the height of the Ebola scare, he said, it wasn't "alarmist" for patients and potential patients to be concerned.

“If I had to go to a hospital I’d probably drive another 10 miles,” Biswas said. “Why take a chance?”

Like other corporate crises — the Exxon Valdez oil spill, Tylenol poisonings and the Jack in the Box E. coli crisis — Biswas expects that this one will fade with time.

“The American public is very willing to forgive and forget provided companies, organizations say, ‘We screwed up,’” Biswas said.

In a full-page ad in *The Dallas Morning News* last Sunday, Texas Health CEO Barclay Berdan admitted, “We made mistakes in handling this very difficult challenge.”

Presbyterian did not correctly diagnose the first Ebola patient, Thomas Eric Duncan, on his initial visit to the ER. He was sent home and returned two days later in an ambulance.

In another filing Wednesday, THR gave results for the system’s first nine months of the year. Total operating revenue, at just over \$3 billion, was up 5.6 percent from the same period in 2013. Operating income, \$210 million, was down 6.4 percent.

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