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*Tri-City Medical Center Chief of Staff Dr. Richard Burruss and other physicians voice their concerns about the hospital's governance system at a news conference at the hospital Monday morning. (Photo by Jamie Scott Lytle - Staff Photographer)*

## OCEANSIDE: Doctors ask for leadership change at Tri-City

By PAUL SISSON - Staff Writer

OCEANSIDE ---- A dozen doctors stood shoulder-to-shoulder Monday at Tri-City Medical Center and said they will ask the hospital's publicly elected board to help find a new, less incendiary form of government within the next 90 days.

Led by Chief of Staff Dr. Richard Burruss, the physicians said they'll make a public presentation to the board Thursday calling for the formation of an advisory panel that could potentially steer the hospital toward a partnership with a private health-care company.

Burruss said Tri-City's Medical Executive Committee, which oversees all doctors who work at the hospital, reached a consensus after four Tri-City board members ousted the hospital's entire management team during a closed meeting Dec. 18.

Doctors made a previous presentation to the board behind closed doors. On Monday, they met with the press to provide a peek at the script for Thursday's formal meeting with the board.

Burruss said when the board put hospital CEO Arthur Gonzalez and his management team on unexplained paid leave, it "crystallized" long-simmering frustration among hospital staff over the public board's regular infighting. In recent months, board members have publicly yelled at each other from the dais on issues ranging from finances to doctor discipline.

Burruss said the drama has hurt Tri-City's image and could soon send more doctors and patients to other, more peaceful hospitals if it is not resolved.

"We felt that was disruptive to the medical center and disruptive to the care that is being provided to our community," Burruss said.

The doctors are asking for a special panel made up of board members, doctors, nurses, health-care workers and members of the public who would look into other governance models for Tri-City. The doctors' proposal also calls for the panel to examine all possible "partnership opportunities" in and out of San Diego County.

Burruss did not specify which health care systems the doctors think ought to be on Tri-City's short list.

"I think the physicians have been, in some ways, disenfranchised from the decision-making process," he said.

Other public hospital districts, including Grossmont Health Care District in East San Diego County, have leased their facilities to private nonprofit operators over the past few decades. That idea does not appear to have much traction with many Tri-City board members, such as former board chairwoman RoseMarie Reno.

At a recent hospital board meeting, Reno said Tri-City would resist any opportunities to move governance to a private board.

"This hospital will be the people's hospital, and not the doctors' hospital," Reno said.

It was Reno --- selected as the board's chair last year but recently demoted--- and three other board members who put Gonzalez, and eight other hospital administrators, on paid administrative leave during a special closed-door meeting Dec. 18.

The board took action without informing Tri-City's medical staff first. The nine employees remain on leave, and the results of an investigation into hospital finances still have not been released.

At Monday's press conference, several doctors said they believe constant arguments among board members at public board meetings have created a false perception of poor quality care among patients.

Dr. Andrew Heinle, an anesthesiologist, said the sometimes political nature of board meetings drags the entire hospital down.

"You don't want to have to defend your hospital to your patients," Heinle said. "We provide very good care here. I've worked at many other hospitals ---- Cedars (Cedars-Sinai in Los Angeles), UCLA hospital, and the quality of the care here is excellent. To have the circus happening detracts from our ability to take care of patients."

Several doctors said a government-maintained Web site, [hospitalcompare.org](http://hospitalcompare.org), shows that Tri-City's quality is top-notch. The Web site ranks Tri-City's care as good as or better than care offered by neighboring hospitals.

However, the hospital has recently been twice stung by mortality reports that suggested the hospital had higher-than-average death rates among stroke patients, and some heart patients, in 2006. Strangely, the [hospitalcompare.org](http://hospitalcompare.org) site, which is run by the U.S. Department of Health Services, finds that Tri-City's death rates are no different from the national average.

Burruss said Monday it is time for the board to work in partnership with hospital staff to correct Tri-City's image problem. He said many hospital employees are embarrassed to tell friends where they work.

"That is an attitude that we need to change," he said. "That attitude is the result of the actions of the board. It is not the result of the care that we provide."

Thursday's meeting begins at 3 p.m. in the hospital's lower-level Assembly Room 3.

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