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Patient-safety panel fighting Corbett merger plan

By Amy Worden
Inquirer Harrisburg Bureau

HARRISBURG - A panel credited with reducing medical errors at Pennsylvania hospitals says its own health is endangered - by Gov. Corbett's plan to fold it into the state Department of Health.

The board of the Patient Safety Authority adopted a resolution Tuesday saying such a move would destroy its autonomy. The privately funded authority, which collects and studies hospital data, has gained a national reputation for improving patient safety.

"We felt strongly we should resist this movement," said the authority's acting chairman, Stanton Smullens, chief medical officer at Jefferson Health System in Philadelphia. "We are concerned that this would harm citizens of the commonwealth if we lost our independence."

Christine Cronkright, communications director for the Department of Health, said Tuesday that administration officials were aware of the board's concerns and would address them this spring as part of budget negotiations.

Corbett, in his February budget proposal, said merging the authority into the Health Department would help forward his goal of streamlining state government and would "better utilize health information for public-policy purposes."

The governor also proposed moving another agency into the Department of Health - the state-funded Pennsylvania Health Care Cost Containment Council.

"The idea is to provide efficiencies in delivering programs and services, since they all have a common goal of ensuring patient safety," Cronkright said.

Since the legislature created the Patient Safety Authority in 2002, it has gathered 1.3 million reports of "nonharmful errors" from more than 500 Pennsylvania hospitals and surgical centers, as well as nursing homes.

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The reports, as many as 1,000 a day, are used to find ways to prevent harmful errors, such as incorrect giving of medicines, wrong-site surgeries, or hospital-acquired infections.

Hospitals finance the authority's annual \$5.9 million budget, from which contractors are paid to analyze the data.

"Hospitals have a system for reporting adverse effects; we provide the system for nonharmful errors," John Clarke, the authority's clinical director and a faculty member at Drexel University College of Medicine, said Tuesday.

"When we go back and request more information, we do so in a constructive way, not to build a case against the hospitals. Instead, we come up with solutions."

A key to the authority's role, officials say, has been its autonomy. Clarke said, "It's somewhat of a curiosity that a Republican administration would bring an independent agency into the core of state government."

Among the authority's achievements: rooting out missteps that led to surgeries on the wrong patients or body parts. Officials say one group of 30 hospitals reduced such events 73 percent. Data from the authority also helped persuade federal regulators to change labeling rules for hydromorphone, a narcotic that, if confused with morphine, could be fatal.

The decline in hospital errors has also helped reduce medical-malpractice claims and payouts, officials said.

Board member Cliff Rieders, a lawyer, said he believed moving the authority into the Health Department would require legislative action.

Contact Amy Worden

at 717-783-2584

or aworden@phillynews.com,

or follow on Twitter @inkyamy.

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