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Weekly Update for New York State Physicians

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Christina Cronin Southard, Editor

Julie Vecchione DeSimone, Assistant Editor

[mssnye-news@mssny.org](mailto:mssnye-news@mssny.org) [www.mssny.org](http://www.mssny.org)



President, Sam Unterricht, MD

## Colleagues

I must admit I have a soft spot in my heart for Long Island College Hospital (LICH) in Brooklyn. I have been associated with LICH in one capacity or another since 1973. Whether as a student, resident or attending, I have many fond memories of walking down the halls of LICH with my colleagues and mentors. The thought of LICH closing is very painful, particularly since it is the founding hospital of my medical school, Downstate, and since LICH has such an exceptional history, with so many medical giants and innovations to its credit.

Of course, the closing of any hospital is devastating, not only to the physicians, but to the entire work force and to the community that depends on it as their medical home. There are those who are concerned about ambulance response times in downtown Brooklyn and the loss of a hospital near Manhattan in times of crisis. In the case of the 156-year old LICH, there are many who are willing to fight to keep it open.

In March, State university officials voted to close Long Island College Hospital, ending a legal fight that had delayed the demise of the medical center in downtown Brooklyn. This was the second time in just over a month that university trustees had voted to close the ailing institution. But that decision hit a legal roadblock when State Supreme Court Justice Johnny Baynes found fault with the initial vote, saying the university did not abide by a law requiring open meetings to be held on the decision.

SUNY officials have said they need to move quickly to close the hospital, which they say loses \$4 million a month. Although estimates vary, the hospital is hemorrhaging dollars and dragging down its owner, SUNY-Downstate Medical

Center, which also includes a Medical School and University Hospital of Brooklyn and smaller facilities in Flatbush and Bay Ridge.

In order to close the hospital, SUNY had to submit a plan for approval to the state Health Department. Since then, the university has faced strong legal and political challenges. Unions for nurses and other health-care workers vowed to continue fighting the closure of the hospital, which employs about 2,000 people.

Downstate's 2012 losses could top \$200 million, said a recent audit by New York State Controller Thomas DiNapoli's office, which blamed the 2011 purchase of LICH as a major cause of Downstate's dire financial straits. LICH has lost money for 17 consecutive years and unloading it was a boon to Continuum, the former owner.

Many physicians, nurses and community groups are still fighting to keep the hospital open, in a battle that has unfolded over six months. Mayoral hopeful Bill de Blasio received a court order to halt the closure of LICH temporarily. Although SUNY Downstate said it still plans to empty the hospital of patients by July 28, Mr. de Blasio will ask a judge to keep the hospital open.

Yesterday, after a day of legal maneuvering by both sides of the dispute, State Appellate Court Judge Robert Miller ordered SUNY to keep LICH open, pending a Thursday State Supreme Court Hearing on the fate of the hospital.

As LICH is emptied of patients, and more and more attendings seek privileges elsewhere, MSSNY has heard from many concerned physicians. Dr. Benjamin Rosenberg—a MSSNY member since 1956—has practiced at LICH, as did his father beginning in 1905. He defines the whole situation as a tragedy, since LICH was the first teaching hospital in the United States. He was also concerned about the fate of the many endowment funds the hospital distributed and the pavilions named after donors.

Can LICH be saved? I hope so. LICH has been burdened in part by an expensive monthly billing contract. Reworking that and some creative thinking may make LICH financially viable. The real estate is extremely valuable; perhaps LICH could downsize and some of the property could be sold to developers. Maybe the air rights could be developed. I hope that all avenues are explored; it would be a shame to have to bid farewell to this fine institution.

**Sam Unterricht, MD**