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High court extends angioplasty research

By **JASON HARRIS**

Burlington County Times

Virtua West Jersey Hospital Marlton and eight other hospitals can continue to take part in a medical research project that allows them to perform elective angioplasty procedures without cardiac surgery facilities on site, the state Supreme Court ruled yesterday.

The court in May had ordered the Department of Health and Human Services to revise rules to allow the hospitals to continue treating current patients, but said they could not accept new patients and ruled that the study had to be shut down by to-day.

However, Virtua Health, the parent company for Virtua West Jersey, filed a motion in September asking the court to extend the deadline.

The company argued that the deadline didn't give the health department enough time to draft new rules without interrupting the study.

Yesterday's ruling gives the hospitals six additional months to complete the application process.

"It's a happy day at Virtua," said CEO Richard Miller. "When the Supreme Court made its initial ruling . . . they really were commenting on the certificate-of-need rules and how the department conceived those rules."

"Our opponents had claimed the (May) ruling was based on quality and safety," Miller added. "This ruling today says that's inaccurate."

A state Administrative Board decided at a hearing two weeks ago to allow the hospitals to continue offering angioplasties after the state devised new regulations and issued licenses. That process was expected to take six months.

The medical research project, a three-year experiment by Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, investigates whe-ther

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it is safe for patients to undergo elective angioplasties at hospitals that don't also have on-site heart-surgery teams as backup should something go wrong.

During an angioplasty, a doctor inserts and inflates a small balloon into a blocked artery to remove the blockage

and widen the artery. A small metal coil, called a stent, often is inserted into the cleared artery to help keep it open.

The decision is a setback for Deborah Heart and Lung Center in Pemberton Township, Cooper University Hospital Medical Center in Camden and Our Lady of Lourdes Medical Center in Camden, which had filed the initial suit.

They claimed the procedure, although common, was not safe to perform without surgical backup and that the study was unnecessary because most state residents are within 30 minutes of a cardiac-surgery center.

Those hospitals released a joint statement late yesterday afternoon.

"Our state's policy, until now, has been to promote patient safety and maintain centers of cardiac excellence," the statement read. "The experiment will financially benefit a few community hospitals at the expense of patient safety. It does nothing to promote quality cardiac programs, protect patient safety or advance science."

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