



## The Star-Ledger

### Community hospitals get OK on angioplasty

State high court extends program offering heart procedure without cardiac surgeon

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Nine community hospitals can continue performing elective angioplasty without having cardiac surgeons on site as part of a national study, the state Supreme Court ruled yesterday.

The opinion came a day before a court-imposed deadline could have resulted in all nine programs shutting down. The court in May directed the State Department of Health and Senior Services to re-write its regulations to allow the demonstration program to continue, since it conflicted with rules already on the books. The department was also told to issue a new call for applications to the program.

All nine hospitals must now re-apply to continue participating in the Johns Hopkins University-led study, known as Atlantic C-Port-E. The study is designed to determine whether angioplasty -- a procedure performed by cardiologists to open blocked heart arteries -- can be as safely performed in community hospitals without having cardiac surgeons on hand.

Yesterday's ruling was issued in response to a motion filed by Virtua Health on behalf of the nine hospitals, asking the court to extend a Nov. 30 deadline to give the state more time to comply with its directives.

"We have always believed that the court intended to allow the department to move forward so that the elective angioplasty demonstration project could continue uninterrupted," said Richard P. Miller, president and CEO of Virtua Health.

The ruling came as a disappointment for the three cardiac centers that had mounted a legal challenge to New Jersey's participation in the study, which was approved by State Health Commissioner Fred Jacobs in October 2005.

"Our state's policy, until now, has been to promote patient safety and maintain centers of cardiac excellence. The experiment will financially benefit a few community hospitals at the expense of patient safety advance," said a joint statement issued by Cooper University Hospital and Our Lady of Lourdes Medical Center, both in Camden, and Deborah Heart and Lung Center in Browns Mills.

Recently released state data showed a total of 1,101 elective angioplasties being performed by the nine study hospitals between April 1, 2006 and June 30, 2007, with four deaths.

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