

November 18, 2021

Hang Nguyen  
District Manager  
Orange County District Office  
California Department of Public Health  
681 S. Parker Street, Suite 200  
Orange, CA 92868

***RE: Complaint regarding West Anaheim Medical Center***

Dear Ms. Nguyen,

This letter represents a formal complaint and request for an investigation of conditions at West Anaheim Medical Center (the Hospital), a 167-bed general acute care hospital located at 3033 West Orange Avenue in Anaheim, California (License Number: 060000182). We request that the California Department of Public Health investigate conditions (described below) that are placing the health and safety of patients at risk due to inadequate staffing of the cardiac catheterization lab (cath lab).

**Background:** The National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW) represents 118 caregivers at the Hospital, including Licensed Vocational Nurses (LVNs), Registered Respiratory Therapists, Certified Respiratory Therapists, Respiratory Care Practitioners, Radiology Technicians, CT Technicians, Ultrasound Technicians, Nuclear Medicine Technicians, MRI Technicians, Echo Technicians, EKG Technicians, Cardiovascular Technicians, Scrub Technicians, and Operating Room (OR) Technicians.

**Failure to Adequately Staff the Cardiac Catheterization Lab:**

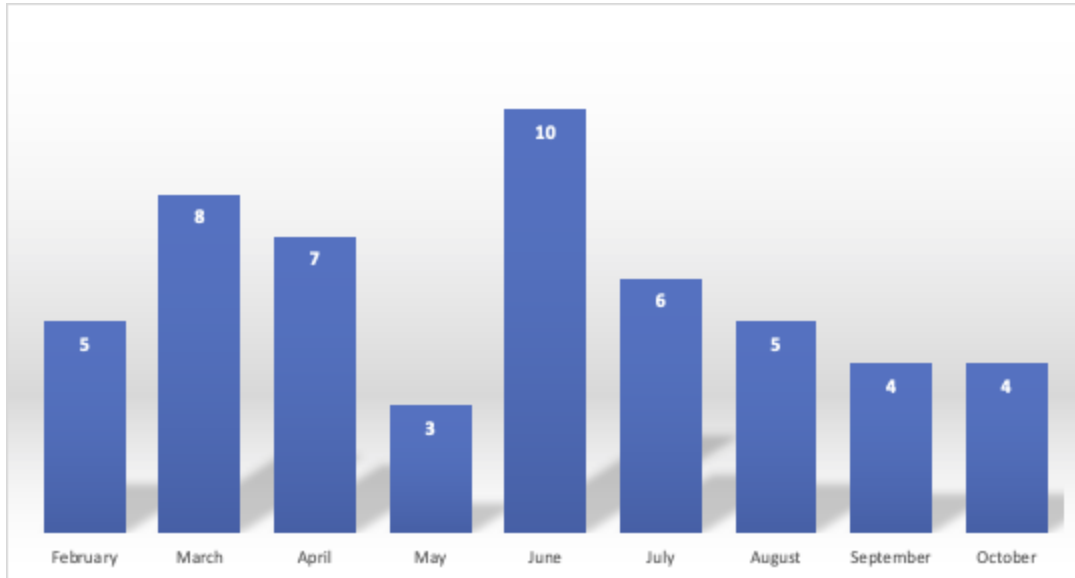
As one of 25 hospitals in Orange County designated to receive emergency heart attack patients, West Anaheim Medical Center is violating the county's requirement that it maintain a dedicated cardiovascular cath lab team available and on call 24 hours a day, 365 days a year to treat emergency heart attacks.

Scrub and radiology technicians are required members of a cath lab team. However, the Hospital doesn't maintain a dedicated team of two technicians (techs) between 5:30 p.m. and 7 a.m. weekdays or anytime on Saturdays and Sundays. Instead of being always available to treat an emergency heart attack, techs assigned to the cath lab are given the added responsibilities of staffing interventional radiology (IR) procedures. During regular working hours (on weekdays from 7:00 AM to 5:30 PM), two separate teams are maintained for IR procedures and cath lab procedures. However, if one tech is out sick or otherwise unable to attend work, the Hospital does not provide a substitute and is left without enough techs to simultaneously provide care to a patient undergoing a scheduled IR procedure and a patient experiencing a heart attack who needs treatment in the cath lab.

Tech understaffing results in the hospital's frequent inability to receive incoming emergency cardiac patients despite the fact that as a Cardiovascular Receiving Center (CVRC) it is the Hospital's duty to provide such services. ***Between February 1 to October 13, 2021, West Anaheim's cardiovascular receiving center was down for almost 97 hours.*** The hospital wasn't available to receive heart attack patients 52 times in the nine-month period (see Figure 1). ***On average, the cardiovascular receiving center was down for 10 hours every month.*** During any period when West Anaheim's cardiac receiving

center is not functioning, heart attack patients brought to the Hospital for treatment would be turned away and sent to the closest cardiovascular receiving center, which is 30 minutes away.

Figure 1: Number of Times Cardiovascular Receiving Center was Unavailable Per Month



A heart attack patient needs to be treated within 90 minutes of the onset of symptoms for optimal recovery. Waiting longer for treatment means more cardiac muscle damage and a lower chance of survival.

The duration of down time ranges from 18 minutes to 5 hours. In nine instances, the receiving center was down for three hours or more. On September 15, 2021, the heart attack receiving center was down for close to five hours.

For residents living in the Hospital service area, those who are at risk of heart attacks face even greater risks of being turned away from the emergency room and delaying their treatment by up to a half hour (the time it takes to get to the closest heart attack receiving center from the Hospital). On average, the Hospital treats seven heart attack patients per month.

This risk was underscored by a tragic event on Sunday, October 17, 2021. A patient died of a heart attack while undergoing an IR procedure at the hospital. Even if the patient had been stabilized, West Anaheim would not have had a team at the cardiac catheterization lab available to provide care, in violation of county requirements.

When techs are responsible for providing coverage for both IR and cath lab procedures they can't be in two places at once. In turn, when a patient presents emergently with a myocardial infarction (MI) at the same time an IR procedure is already underway, the Hospital cannot care for the MI patient and fulfill its duty to be a fully operational CVRC.

**Request:** We have a number of concerns about apparent violations of state law and regulations that include, but are not limited to, the following:

**Failure to Protect Patients Through Appropriate Staffing of the Cardiac Catheterization Lab:**

Orange County EMS Agency Policy/Procedure #630 defines the requirements for designation as an Orange County Cardiovascular Receiving Center (CVRC), including the following: “A dedicated cardiovascular catheterization laboratory team to perform primary percutaneous coronary intervention with a written on call schedule for operation of the cardiac catheterization laboratory 24 hours per day, 365 days per year.”

We believe this complaint justifies immediate investigation by the California Department of Public Health, as it reflects the Hospital’s failure to comply with its own policies and obligations as a Cardiovascular Receiving Center and puts patients at risk of harm, injury, and death due to an inadequate ability to respond to cardiac emergencies.

The Hospital cares for a patient population which includes individuals at high risk for heart disease and strokes. According to the California Department of Public Health, there are 129.4 deaths per 100,000 in the population due to coronary heart disease in the city of Anaheim.<sup>1</sup> That is higher than the county rate of deaths (98.8) or state (103.8).

West Anaheim Medical Center is violating state law and putting patients' lives at risk by failing to maintain required staffing levels for its Cardiovascular Receiving Center. The hospital has also rejected proposals from workers to provide adequate staffing. As described in this complaint, West Anaheim’s violation of California law necessitates a timely investigation and intervention to protect patients. In turn, we ask for your attention to this urgent matter.

Please contact Yvonne Yen Liu at (646) 321-5710 with any questions.

Thank you,

Yvonne Yen Liu, Research Associate  
National Union of Healthcare Workers  
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Glendale, CA 91204

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ochealthiertogether.org/indicators/index/view?indicatorId=99&localeId=133781>