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## Uninsured called a danger to O.C. health care

Medical panelists warn of drain on resources and a need for a solution, particularly for Latino seniors.

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**ORANGE** • Orange County health-care leaders Monday warned that the lack of a safety net for people without insurance is endangering the whole health system and that a day of reckoning is fast approaching.

"Unfunded and underfunded health care is something that every Californian should be concerned about,"

said Ralph Cygan, president of UCI Medical Center. "I think there's going to be an increasing crisis in the years ahead, with federal deficits and state deficits."

Cygan's remarks came at a panel on health issues chaired by state Attorney General Bill Lockyer. Lockyer said,

"Orange County stands out as a place that's actually done a smart job of figuring out how to manage these issues in a way that perhaps should be a

model for the state."

But while speakers lauded each other for collaborative efforts to care for the poor and reduce the rate of uninsurance, the consensus was that there's more work to be done.

Pamela Austin, CEO of Orange County Health Needs Assessment, which conducts regular surveys on the demographics of health coverage, said 2004 data to be published in May show that the rate of uninsurance among Orange County's children continues to drop after falling from 11 percent in 1998 to 8.5 percent in 2001. The rate of uninsurance

among adults also fell in 2004, though much more modestly, after dropping from 16 percent to less than 12 percent from 1998 to 2001.

Still, Cygan, whose institution hosted the meeting, said UCI Medical Center expects to lose \$80 million this year on care of indigent patients - money it will recover by charging more for patients who are insured.

America Bracho, CEO of Latino Health Access, said health-coverage problems are much more serious among Latinos - who now make up 33 percent of Orange County households - than the overall

numbers suggest. For example, while Austin's group found that just 2 percent of Orange County seniors are uninsured, Bracho said a project sponsored by her organization discovered an uninsurance rate of 47 percent among Latino seniors.

"We have a crisis right now," said Felix Schwarz, director of the Health Care Council of Orange County. He warned that the impending sale of four hospitals by Tenet Healthcare Corp., including Western Medical Center-Santa Ana - one of just three O.C. trauma centers - could erode the county's health-care

network.

Cygan said UCI is also concerned about the proposed sale of the four hospitals to Costa Mesa-based Integrated Healthcare Holdings Inc.

"The four Tenet hospitals form a ring around UCI Medical Center, and (the new owners) are going to immediately, I believe, cut back on services to underfunded patients, overwhelming our emergency room," Cygan said.

Larry B. Anderson, president of IHHI, refuted Cygan's contention. "It's not our plan to cut any services, and especially those to the indigent," Anderson said. "He's wrong."