

## Immigrant advocates seek NY state action on patients' language barrier

By **RICHARD PYLE**

Associated Press Writer

April 21, 2005, 5:22 PM EDT

NEW YORK -- An immigrants' advocacy group asked the state on Thursday to take legal action against four metropolitan area hospitals for failing to provide interpreters for emergency patients who don't speak English well.

The civil rights complaint, filed with the office of Attorney General Eliot Spitzer, named four private institutions -- Jamaica and Flushing hospital medical centers in Queens, Brookdale University Hospital and Medical Center in Brooklyn and St. Vincent's Staten Island Hospital -- all of which serve local immigrant communities.

Officials of the New York Immigration Coalition said they had documented dozens of cases in which patients with English deficiencies faced life-threatening medical crises but the hospitals had shown no intention to rectify the situation.

The hospitals disputed the claims.

The legal issue is whether hospitals violate federal and state laws mandating equal access to services by providing no capable interpreters. There were documented cases of doctors using cab drivers or children to interpret vital medical information for patients with limited English ability, the advocacy group said.

It added that surveys showed one in four such patients said they did not understand the diagnosis or treatment and one in 10 said medical decisions were made without their consent.

"These hospitals have not taken even common sense steps to make it easier for their patients to communicate with doctors," said Margie McHugh, a spokeswoman for the immigration coalition, which announced the legal move during a street demonstration in midtown Manhattan.

About 100 people held up signs in English, Spanish and Korean, reading, "Bad Communication, Bad Health Care," to protest the hospitals' alleged failure to help patients needing translators or interpreters to confer with doctors and health aides.

Adam Gurvitch, the coalition's director of health advocacy, said the problem is most common for Hispanics, Koreans, Russians and Creole-speaking Haitians.

Gurvitch said New York's public hospitals had been "much more responsive" to the needs of immigrant patients with limited English skills than the private institutions. One solution has been to train their own multi-lingual employees as medical interpreters, he said.

The Brookdale, Flushing and Brookdale hospitals, which are part of the MediSys Health Network, issued a joint statement disputing the claim they have failed to address the problem.

"Our hospitals freely provide community outreach, health screenings and assessments and culturally directed services," said MediSys vice president Ole Pedersen.

He said they had made "significant efforts" to comply with federal and state guidelines on access to medical care, including offering language assistance. He said the three hospitals together have 10,000 bilingual staff members who are listed in a language bank, an agreement with New York University to assess their interpreting capabilities and 24-hour telephone interpretation services in 125 languages.

At St. Vincent's, where one case involved a woman who lost her child and became sterile and another concerned an emergency amputation, spokeswoman Sheila Gibbons said changes in the past year include training 17 employees as medical interpreters, adding bilingual staff and upgrading a telephone system to cover nearly 100 languages.

"St. Vincent's hospital is committed to providing culturally appropriate care to all patients including interpretive services where needed," she said.

Spitzer's office is investigating.