

SIoux CITY Journal Online Edition

Grassley visits Spencer Hospital dialysis unit

By Russ Oechslin, Journal correspondent

June 2, 2005

SPENCER, Iowa -- Even though his brother-in-law is undergoing dialysis treatments in eastern Iowa, U.S. Sen.

Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, told his hosts at the Spencer Hospital on Wednesday he has never spent an hour in a dialysis facility.

With invitations to visit and learn about six dialysis units across the state, the senator also had to admit to unit manager Carolyn Sheridan he picked Spencer's because it fit his schedule between town meetings.

But Sheridan and her associates made the best of their 60-minute opportunity to educate the senator on dialysis issues and ask for more funding from the federal government.

Grassley's education began before 8 a.m. by talking to dialysis patients in the midst of their thrice-weekly procedures.

Attorney Redge Berg, Spencer, has been in dialysis for about a year. Despite that, he continues to work every day. "I can hardly wait to get a transplant," Berg told the senator.

Berg is scheduled for kidney transplant surgery later this month. All indications are that his wife Diane will serve as donor.

"I feel very fortunate, as so many people will never get a donor kidney. And I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have Medicare," said Berg, who turns 66 next week.

Dialysis costs are between \$100 and \$130 per session, three times each week, plus the cost of medications, according to Kathy Mehan, a dialysis nurse.

Grassley also listened to Delbert Kooker, 77, of Cylinder, explain that the dialysis schedule really "messes up my fishing and gardening time."

Grassley used the opportunity to explain that he has always been involved in discussions about donated organ distribution, and whether a national or regional system would work better.

Grassley explained that he intends to support the regional concept because experts tell him Midwesterners are generally healthier as they take better care of themselves.

Nurse Lisa Ducommun showed the senator the \$15,000 dialysis machines, the water purification system and the artificial kidneys used in the process. She explained the costs of each -- noting how difficult it is to keep costs in line with Medicare reimbursement.

In the Spirit Lake facility run by the Spencer Hospital, Sheridan noted that, because it is a stand-alone unit, all the expenses of operation, all utilities and even the cost of mowing grass must be covered by the billing. In Spencer, much of those costs are absorbed in other areas.

Sheridan questioned how a for-profit organization could serve the patient with the same quality of service at a profit and pushed for Grassley's support on bills currently in Congress that deal with kidney care quality, education and federal reimbursements for treatments.

While Grassley didn't address Medicare reimbursement directly, he did explain to patients and staff members that beginning in January all Medicare patients will have the opportunity to sign up for prescription coverage, to help cover what is now out-of-pocket expense.

Although it is a voluntary program, Grassley termed it "a no-brainer," especially for those living at less than 160 percent of the poverty level or spending more than \$3,600 per year on prescription drugs.

The senator also promoted the idea of health savings accounts for those under 65.

In a brief news conference before heading to a town meeting in Sibley, Iowa, Grassley explained that he would be "leaning against voting for the bill" on stem cell research which has just passed the House and is threatened by a presidential veto.

The senator termed himself "a 71-year-old embryo. And we need to understand that there is public funding for existing lines" of stem cells, Grassley said, adding that there is also a lot of research going on in the private sector.

"I lean toward a 'no' vote out of my respect for life," he said.