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News

German science minister tries to rescue Lübeck university hospital from closure

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Students, academics, and politicians have criticised the state government of Schleswig-Holstein, in northern Germany, over its plans to close the university hospital and medical faculty in Lübeck.

From autumn 2011 no new medical students will be accepted by the university, and current students will be transferred to the university hospital in Kiel, about 60 km away. The state hopes to save 24m (£20m; \$30m) a year with the cut.

Germany's science minister, Annette Schavan, is opposed to the closure, saying it will worsen the shortage of doctors affecting many rural areas and east Germany. Federal government policy is to increase the number of medical students in Germany. Currently about 40% of young doctors leave clinical practice or the country.

Health system experts have demanded an improvement in working conditions for young doctors, rather than an increase in the number of medical school places.

By law the federal government cannot fund universities and medical schools directly, as responsibility lies with individual German states. The science minister is considering proposals for a new health research centre in Lübeck, which might cover some of the costs of the university hospital.

The Association of German University Hospitals would like to see responsibility for funding medical education move from the states to the federal government, as individual states may lack the funds to support it adequately in future. The association also warns of a more severe shortage of doctors in the long term.

However, the government of Schleswig-Holstein is determined to save money and plans to sell its other university hospital, that in Kiel, to a private hospital chain in 2015. One of the reasons for the closure of Lübeck is the need for 700m to refurbish ageing hospital buildings.

The university and the city of Lübeck called the state government's decision a "grave mistake" and pointed out that 1500 places for medical students and 1100 training places for molecular biologists and medical technicians would be lost, as well as many of the 5000 other jobs in the university hospital.

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