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House Bill 5000 shouldn't pass

Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan isn't often on the wrong side of issues. In general, she does a good, conscientious job for the state.

However, no one is right all the time, and Madigan is off-base to propose and push for the passage of what is now House Bill 5000.

That bill would force hospitals to spend the equivalent of 8 percent of their total operating expenses on charity care. The bill's proponents say hospitals can afford to give away that amount of free care because most operate under a tax-exempt status.

The Illinois Hospital Association, many hospitals and a number of legislators have come out against the bill, arguing that it would create a hardship for the state's hospitals, many of which are barely profitable.

Seemingly flush suburban hospitals would be affected, as well.

Locally, Edward Hospital spent about \$3.4 million in charity care during fiscal 2005. Had the bill been in effect at that time, Edward's charity care expenses would have totaled about \$22.4 million, hospital officials have said. This would have been sufficient to turn the hospital's \$15 million profit for the year into a \$7 million deficit.

Edward reinvested that surplus into facility improvements and equipment upgrades, investments it would not have been able to make had it lost money.

Also in fiscal 2005, the hospital spent about \$49.1 million on unreimbursed items of community benefit, including sliding scales of financial assistance based on income to those who do not have health insurance. The hospital also provides numerous programs for the community and subsidizes some health-care services, such as mental health services, that are underfunded by insurance companies and the government.

In general, hospitals probably need fewer government mandates and cash grabs, not more.

House Republican Leader Tom Cross, R-Oswego, has termed HB 5000 "dead and rightly so," with scant support among legislators.

We hope he's right, though while the bill is back in the Rules Committee it still could rear its ugly head again.

If it ever comes to a vote, we would urge legislators in both parties to oppose HB 5000.