



Doctors who spoke out

Wednesday, October 29, 2003

Dr. Jerome Finkelstein, New York City

Finkelstein, a burn specialist at New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center, began noticing in 1994 that a colleague was acting oddly. The other burn specialist blamed the death of three firefighters on nurses who wanted "to make him look bad," accused a secretary of having Mafia connections and confronted Finkelstein for "taking part in a conspiracy to interfere with [his] impending marriage." When Finkelstein reported the behavior, the hospital terminated his and the other doctor's faculty positions "because of the continued personal issues" between the two. Finkelstein also was transferred to a smaller hospital with no burn unit, and his salary was halved. He filed a suit over the actions, but in 2002 withdrew it. He is now director of the Staten Island University Hospital burn center.

Drs. Mark Murfin and Bruce Frank, Centralia, Ill.

Murfin and Frank were suspended at St. Mary's Hospital in 1994 for "disruptive behavior" after going public about what they described as the hospital's inadequate quality controls and the fact that Medicare patients were being hospitalized 60 percent longer than national average. Murfin eventually got his position back; Frank had to leave town after his patient referrals dropped 70 percent. Hospital spokeswoman Julie Long declined comment, noting that the hospital now has different leadership.

Dr. David Shaller, Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

Shaller, 52, was fired from the Veterans Affairs Medical Center at Wilkes-Barre after trying to expose poor patient care, and his legal attempts to regain his position continue 13 years later. Shaller, chief of rheumatology and chief physician for the hospital's nursing home care unit, complained in 1988 when his hospital began transferring seriously ill patients from the facility's hospital to an adjacent nursing home. A hospital committee, which included the physician who ordered the patient transfers, decided Shaller's complaint had no validity. Afterward, he was transferred to lower level jobs, threatened with a sexual misconduct charge and eventually fired after he had complained about patient care to the VA inspector general's office. A congressional subcommittee looking at VA medical care later cited Shaller as one example of how "honest employees have had their jobs eliminated and their lives destroyed because they attempted to expose poor patient care." He has filed several lawsuits trying to get his job back, but has not been able to get a hearing on them.

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