
Carney fires 29 in abuse incident

By Liz Kowalczyk

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Carney Hospital fired the staff of its adolescent psychiatry unit Thursday, after an investigation into an employee's alleged sexual assault of a patient uncovered serious patient safety problems.

Hospital president Bill Walczak said he hired former attorney general Scott Harshbarger and his law firm a month ago to investigate the assault allegation and conditions on the 14-bed locked unit for extremely troubled teens.

When he read Harshbarger's report Thursday, Walczak said he decided to replace the nurses and other staff on the unit.

The report described "serious concerns about patient safety and quality of care on the unit. It was not functioning properly. It was recommended by them to start over on the unit," Walczak said in an interview. "We will have top- notch employees replace those who left. My goal is to make it the best unit in the state."

He would not provide details of the alleged assault or patient safety concerns, or comment on why the entire staff was dismissed, given that the allegation involved one employee and one patient.

Walczak said he was told about the accusations a month ago, soon after the incident allegedly occurred, and immediately reported it to state mental health officials and put the unit's staff on administrative leave.

The hospital did not notify law enforcement because attorneys told its executives that it is up to the patient and his or her family to report the incident to police.

Massachusetts Nurses Association spokesman David Schildmeier said the Dorchester hospital fired 29 employees, including 13 nurses who are members of the union. He said he could not comment about what happened because the MNA had not yet received information from the hospital.

Marylou Sudders, a former state mental health commissioner, said replacing the entire staff is "an extreme measure" that may indicate "there was a culture of not reporting or not being assertive in protecting patients. It's an extraordinary measure to fire everyone. It says to me they have a serious issue and are dealing with it seriously."

Walczak said the state Department of Mental Health, which licenses hospital psychiatric units, investigated the allegations this month. He said the hospital submitted a "plan of action" — including capping the number of patients on the unit at six for now — which the state accepted, allowing the unit to remain open. The hospital would not release the action plan, in part because he said the investigation is ongoing.

State officials would not provide any information to the Globe yesterday or release its reports on the matter.

"We are working with the hospital to make sure everyone on the unit is safe and that it's operating properly," said Health and Human Services spokeswoman Jennifer Kritz.

Walczak said the unit has not accepted many new patients during the past few weeks, and that nurses and counselors from other areas of the hospital are caring for four teens who remain there. Steward Health Care, which bought Carney and five other Catholic hospitals in the Caritas Christi network last year, has given the hospital \$1.5 million to renovate the unit as a result of the investigation, which Walczak said will make it safer

and improve care.

Harshbarger declined to be interviewed yesterday, but he released a statement echoing Walczak's comments.

"Given the serious nature of what we learned while investigating the recent incidents, and recognizing the importance that Carney leadership places on patient care and safety, we have concluded that the unit cannot continue to function as it is currently composed. In our opinion, it would be prudent to replace the current personnel in order to ensure quality care for these vulnerable patients," he said.

Sudders, the president of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, said safety is especially important on locked units because patients are not free to leave.

Lisa Lambert, executive director of the Parent Professional Advocacy League, which works on behalf of mentally ill children, said only the sickest patients are placed in locked psychiatric units and the teens there are often in danger of harming themselves or others and have "more significant and acute mental health issues."

In most units, staff are required to check on the teens at designated intervals.

"A lot of times the adolescents there can't manage themselves or their moods or actions. Parents expect they will be in a place that is safe for them. That is a huge letdown and disappointment when it's not."

Liz Kowalczyk can be reached at kowalczyk@globe.com.

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