



Thursday, August 18, 2005 - Page updated at 08:08 AM

Permission to reprint or copy this article or photo, other than personal use, must be obtained from The Seattle Times. Call 206-464-3113 or e-mail resale@seattletimes.com with your request.

Doctor had revealed secret role as mentor

By Carol M. Ostrom and Jonathan Martin
Seattle Times staff reporters

For years, Dr. Bill Schnall was to many the perfect pediatrician: a hardworking man who rose to the top of his field while going out of his way to help teens in trouble.

But early this year, King County sheriff's investigators interviewed Schnall about allegations that he had engaged in sexually explicit behavior with a college-age patient.

That's when Schnall revealed he had a secret:

No one — not even his wife of 32 years — knew that for the past five years he had secretly chosen one teen each year to help through college. He gave them \$5,000 for school and fatherly advice as long as they stayed in touch, kept a 3.0 grade-point average and didn't tell anyone.

But one of the young men, Schnall said, took advantage. He charged \$40,000 on a credit card Schnall had given him and later made false claims against him, Schnall said.

On Tuesday, the state medical disciplinary board suspended Schnall's medical license, saying that relationship and others with male patients crossed ethical boundaries, endangering the public.

Schnall, in his earlier interview with sheriff's investigators, acknowledged some of the details, but he portrayed them as part of mentoring his troubled young patients, according to the sheriff's report.

Yesterday, many longtime colleagues, patients and their parents said they simply can't believe the allegations against Schnall, 60, a leader at Children's Hospital & Regional Medical Center and a past Shoreline School Board president.

Others, though, wondered why the sheriff's office and prosecutors passed on filing criminal charges if Schnall was deemed such an immediate danger to the public that the disciplinary board took the unusual step of suspending his license before holding a hearing.

A hearing has yet to be scheduled. Children's also has suspended Schnall's privileges to practice there.

Misconduct alleged

Allegations by the state board say Schnall engaged in inappropriate and sexually explicit behavior with three young men in his care, improperly prescribed medication to two other young men, and had nonsexual but inappropriate relationships with three others.

He allegedly treated young men at his home and at theirs, sent them e-mails that often contained "sexual

innuendo," and gave them thousands of dollars, the board said.

Yesterday Schnall didn't return requests for comment, but his attorney, John Gagliardi of Seattle, said Schnall "will be disputing and contesting the charges."

"It's an important issue for Dr. Schnall — it's his license to practice medicine," Gagliardi said.

Schnall's statements to sheriff's investigators earlier this year came in response to a complaint filed by a young man named by the state only as "Patient One."

The state board now alleges that Schnall became so close with the young man that the young man called him "dad," but later deteriorated to the point that in January the young man got a lawyer to ask Schnall to stay away.

The state board alleges that in addition to giving him money, Schnall forced the young man to participate in a process Schnall called "oathing," in which the young man was to undress and masturbate, sometimes after taking the impotence drug Viagra.

In the earlier interview with sheriff's investigators, Schnall acknowledged the "oathing," but said he did it because the young man suffered from various psychological disorders and needed to be punished for not keeping agreements with Schnall, the sheriff's report says.

The sheriff's report says Schnall agreed he had asked the young man to undress. He said he once threatened to make him "stand there with an erection." But he said he didn't carry through with the threat.

The sheriff's report says Schnall also acknowledged giving the young man Viagra, but he said it was intended to be passed on to one of the young man's college friends.

Schnall also told the sheriff's investigators that he never ordered the "oathing" for sexual gratification. "It had never dawned on [Schnall] that it could be viewed as unusual," a detective wrote.

According to the sheriff's report, Schnall told investigators that he loved the patient like one of his own kids, and "felt like he was losing a child," and was surprised when he got a letter from the young man's lawyer.

Declined to file charges

King County prosecutors reviewed complaints against Schnall earlier this year, and interviewed two of the complaining patients. But they declined to file charges because the alleged victims were 16 or older, past the age of consent for some sex crimes, said Dan Donohoe, a spokesman for King County Prosecuting Attorney Norm Maleng.

Criminal charges, such as communicating with a minor for immoral purposes, can only be brought if victims are 15 or under, he said.

"We will closely review the finding of the Department of Health and review those with the King County Sheriff to determine if further investigation is warranted," Donohoe said.

For many of Schnall's patients, colleagues and friends, the state board's allegations are incredible.

An employee of Richmond Pediatric Clinic, Schnall's practice in Shoreline, said yesterday that the office was "filled with flowers, cookies, chocolates, letters, and parents showing their support for an incredible

pediatrician."

"Our phone lines have been crazy with people raising their voices in support of Dr. Schnall, and disgust at the allegations," the employee, Jessica Hiatt, said in an e-mail.

Dr. Robert Hauck, a retired Shoreline pediatrician who has known Schnall for 30 years, said many families with troubled teens chose Schnall as their pediatrician because he "consistently goes the extra mile for his patients," becoming an advocate for teens with problems.

Other supporters suggested that the allegations may have been designed to ruin Schnall.

Marie Aronsen of Seattle, 26, said Schnall treated her from elementary school through college. "It is incomprehensible that anyone could make up such complete lies about him and destroy what has been an extraordinary career dedicated to helping children," she said.

Schnall was born in New York City and graduated from Cornell University Medical College in 1971. He joined the staff of Children's Hospital in 1976.

He was elected to the medical executive committee at Children's last year, after serving as president of the medical staff from 2002-03.

Schnall served on the Shoreline School Board from 1989 to 1996.

Judy Parsons, who served on the board with Schnall, said the doctor was a well-informed and thoughtful board member. "He and his family are wonderful people. I am really shocked," she said.

Carol M. Ostrom: 206-464-2249 or costrom@seattletimes.com

Copyright © 2005 The Seattle Times Company