

Memorandum to the File - Administrative Closure

Staffing Issues in Anesthesiology
WJB Dorn VA Medical Center, Columbia, South Carolina
(2007-00645-HI-0261)

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Office of Inspector General's (OIG) Office of Healthcare Inspections (OHI) reviewed allegations of insufficient anesthesiology staffing impacting quality of care for surgery patients at the William Jennings Bryan Dorn (WJB Dorn) VA Medical Center. The complainant filed the initial complaint with the OIG Hotline on December 6, 2006. An OIG team conducted a Combined Program Assessment (CAP) review of the medical center December 4-8, 2006. The complainant hoped to speak to a member of the CAP team about these concerns while the team was on site.

Background

We did not receive the hotline information until December 14, and interviewed the complainant by phone on January 10, 2007. At that time, the complainant told us that he merely wanted to vent his frustrations. Specifically, the complainant alleged that patients were not receiving pre-operative anesthesia assessments because of a shortage of anesthesiologists, and that management was not willing to reduce the number of surgeries to allow anesthesia staff to conduct these assessments as they had agreed to do.

Insufficient Staffing

The complainant stated that the anesthesia department had only been fully staffed for 8 months in the past 8 years. At that time, there were four anesthesiologists (MDs) and four certified registered nurse anesthetists (CRNAs). At the present time, there are four MDs and two available CRNAs. One CRNA retired 1 year ago and has not been replaced; another is ill and unable to work in the operating room (OR). The complainant stated that either an MD or CRNA can conduct the pre-operative assessment, but that with four ORs in use, all four MDs are needed there. MDs must also stay in the OR to supervise the CRNAs, according to the complainant. The complainant reported that the week of our interview, only one CRNA and four MDs were available. However, one locum tenens physician provided additional anesthesia services.

Inadequate Management Response

The complainant told us that these issues were presented to the Chief of Staff and the Chief of Surgery, and that they agreed to reduce the number of ORs in use if less than four MDs were available. However, this has not happened and the complainant reported that "management lacked commitment to be aggressive" about the issue. Management reported budget constraints and difficulty recruiting impacted their ability to increase staff in the anesthesiology department. The complainant admitted to us that recruiting was a problem nationally and that it was even more difficult to recruit a CRNA in the Columbia area than an MD. At the time of our interview, the complainant told us

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that management was being more aggressive about recruiting and were interviewing a candidate that week.

Status

After stating his concerns, the complainant told us that he wanted to "put his complaint on the back burner and see what happens." He said he now felt cautiously optimistic that staffing would increase and said "it may be more appropriate to not pursue this at the present time." Therefore, we discontinued our review of the allegations.

At this time, the case does not warrant further review and can be closed without the issuance of a formal report. The complainant stated he would contact the OIG Hotline in 6 months if the issues were not resolved.

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Office of Healthcare Inspections
January 22, 2007