

Details emerge in surgeon firing

Doug Flanagan/Post-Register
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Members of the Quincy Valley Medical Center staff have voiced their support of hospital administrator Mehdi Merred in the wake of the recent firing of surgeon Gaston Cornu-Labat — which apparently was done because Cornu-Labat did not go through with a hospital-mandated program after concerns were expressed about his behavior.

The backing of Merred — which came in the form of several written statements received by the Post-Register this week — comes soon after Merred apparently withdrew his name from consideration for the chief medical officer position at Teton Valley Hospital in Driggs, Idaho.

Q102 FM, a radio station in Driggs, posted on its Web site on Nov. 16 that Merred interviewed for the job that day as one of four finalists. However, according to a report in the Teton Valley News on Dec. 7, Merred dropped out of the running.

ADVERTISEMENT Merred told the Post-Register on Monday that he didn't have any comment about why he applied for the job or withdrew from consideration.

Staff members at the medical center have come forward in support of Merred.

According to a statement received by the Post-Register signed by Sage View Clinic doctors Mary Klingner, Charlene Brush and Rhonda Ramm (run in its entirety on page four), Cornu-Labat was released because he failed to comply with an evaluation requested by the hospital after employees expressed their concerns about Cornu-Labat's recent conduct.

"We have been colleagues of Dr. Cornu and have had the opportunity to observe his behavior from the perspective of medical providers. We have all had concerns," the statement read. "We introduced these concerns to the Quincy Valley Medical Center medical staff. The staff, having been confronted with such issues, was obligated by law, by the bylaws governing the medical staff of QVMC, and by our duties to our patients, the people of Quincy, to investigate these concerns to ensure the future welfare of our patients.

"Dr. Cornu was given the fullest benefit of due processes accorded by state law and the rules governing the medical staff. Well-defined procedures were followed diligently. The medical staff afforded Dr. Cornu the benefit of the doubt from the outset of its investigation. The medical staff was moved by Dr. Cornu's testimony to the conclusion that we could not be sure of his well-being without a continuation of this well-defined process through independent evaluation as provided for under the bylaws.

"Dr. Cornu chose not to comply with this process. We fully support the conclusion of the process which has necessitated the termination of Dr. Cornu from QVMC."

Cornu-Labat confirmed the hospital referred him to the Washington Physicians Health Program, a nonprofit corporation that helps identify healthcare practitioners who have a mental or physical condition which could affect their ability to practice with reasonable skill and safety; refer them for evaluation or treatment; monitor their recovery; and endorse their safety.

Cornu-Labat did not undergo the evaluation.

"The WPHP was unable to provide any solution to this situation, and the only thing they did was impose on me their proposal and difficult the process even further," Cornu-Labat wrote in a statement received by the Post-Register. "Anticipating this outcome with this entity, I proceeded on my own to seek three psychological evaluations that proved my mental sanity. These were presented to the administration and inappropriately invalidated by them. This forced me to seek a fourth evaluation by a psychiatrist that further confirmed the previous results, and to report this most irregular situation to the Department of Health and to see if they consider necessary any further evaluation of my person for which I am at their disposition.

"The statements from the hospital describe the observation of concerning behavior that could affect the well-being of the patients. It would be tremendously helpful to know what exactly are the behaviors of concern and how could these affect patient care. I have not been able to gain this knowledge so far. I may be concerned about a friend that is sad, but his sadness neither puts him at fault nor constitutes a danger to anybody. Furthermore, I can be concerned about a friend overly optimistic about a loan that became available to him because, in his euphoria, he may be disregarding some aspect of the reality of how the loan will affect his budget or his saving capacity. This does not make him a danger to anybody except maybe his wallet.

"Please, once more I request that certain authorities from the hospital desist in trying to force my hand and make this whole issue more serious and complicated than what they have already made it."

The hospital's board of directors held a special meeting Monday at which board chairman Don Condit said the Washington State Department of Health is investigating the matter when he read a prepared statement by the hospital board.

"First and foremost, the board would like to assure everyone that the actions of the board and those of the investigative team have been conducted in full compliance with our by-laws and Washington state laws," Condit stated. "To that end, our board secretary has worked extensively with (Merred), acting chief of medical staff and legal counsel to ensure that the investigation was conducted in accordance with the above laws.

"The board believes that the lengthy investigative process has been conducted with the highest level of integrity. The board, together with the investigative team, has not made disclosures which might in some way jeopardize the rights of the parties involved. We are all disappointed that these matters are now the subject of the 'court of public opinion.' The state department of health is currently conducting its own investigation; the board, along with QVMC, assures you that the final results will be disclosed as soon as they are known."

More staff members showed support for Merred this week.

"We as the medical staff of Quincy Valley Hospital wish to express our full support of its administrator, Mr. Mehdi Merred," the hospital's medical staff — Mark Vance, Robert Shelly, Klingner, Celeste Lomarda and Anna Espiritu — wrote in a statement received by the Post-Register. "The medical staff is fully aware of the process followed during the recent dismissal of Dr. Gaston Cornu-Labat. This occurred in accordance with the medical staff bylaws and the internal policies adopted by the medical center. We remain confident that Mr. Merred has acted with the best interest of the hospital and the community in mind.

"During Mr. Merred's almost four years at QVMC, we have worked closely with him and have been

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impressed with the integrity and vision of his leadership. We recognize significant improvements, including financial stability, increased services and decreased employee turnover. We hope that the community will continue to benefit from his leadership at the medical center for years to come."

Eric Harrington, a physician at the hospital, expressed similar thoughts.

"I've worked at the Quincy facility for over a year now. ... (Quincy) is in an isolated area with an extremely low payer mix. Frankly I am surprised the hospital is still operational," Harrington wrote in an e-mail received by the Post-Register. "But somehow it has survived. ... The only reason I have chosen to continue to work at this facility, and sign a contract, is Mr. Merred. ... When I am in Quincy Hospital, there is a sense of community, of service, of dedication and purpose. This is what brings me back. Mr. Merred has brought this into the hospital; it is very clear to me. I speak to him on a regular basis when I am working, and he has a vision for the hospital, which I have bought into. If the Board of Directors of QVMC are unable to retain Mr. Merred as the administrator at this point, it will be a detriment to the community, and everything Mr. Merred has built thus far would vanish."

Sage View Clinic director Colleen Canfield wrote to the board commissioners about Merred's "incredible integrity."

"Mehdi Merred has been the best CEO I have had the pleasure to work with," Canfield wrote. "He goes above and beyond in the way he cares for each of his staff and the hospital. He has sacrificed so much family time because of the needs of the hospital and turned this hospital from being in the red to the black. He deserves your very vocal, public support. ... If Mehdi resigns, my resignation will soon follow. I am not alone in this sentiment and while I would hate to see all of the progress we have made in the last 2 1/2 years disappear, I can all but guarantee the team of practitioners, leadership and staff which has made this facility so successful will no longer exist."

Financial officer Ken Kiehn wrote to the commissioners that Merred is "a truly fine individual."

"He is truly dedicated and committed to the revitalization and viability of QVMC," he wrote. "It is imperative you publicly support his leadership. Give the public the information they need to be able to squelch the personal attacks and innuendos. ... Many employees are worried about their livelihood, and the ramifications of what the future would be for QVMC and the degradation which may befall this hospital without full public board support of Mehdi. Some are concerned to the extent that they worry whether QVMC would continue to exist. Personally, I am at the stage of my career where I would simply retire. I do think it would be a shame that the community of Quincy could lose so much if the board cannot act quickly and decisively with a concerted effort to 'enlighten' the public.' "

Director of marketing and public relations Michele Wurl wrote to the board imploring them to show their support of Merred.

"The experience of the last few months is one that I would not wish upon anyone," she wrote. "Unfortunately, Dr. Cornu has brought this facility, and this community, to the point where your public comments are needed. We cannot sit back and let this facility fall apart, nor can we let the division within the community grow because of fear in speaking out. We cannot let Mehdi leave a facility because of fear (of) overstating our position.

"You know as well as I do that we have nothing to hide and we all look forward to the day when the facts will be released. While within these walls we know this is in the hands of the department of health and we know that things were handled appropriately, unfortunately the community has been led down the road of false rumors, blatant lies and an organized attempt to discredit a few individuals. You cannot let this stand. ... The fact that one man has been able to call not only (Merred's) integrity into question but the integrity of every one of us who work here and make decisions on a daily basis is nothing short of ridiculous."

At Monday's meeting, board member Darrell Van Dyke told a handful of employees present why the board hasn't made a public declaration regarding the matter until that point.

"We've seen the problems," he said, "and we've been cautious in our support because we didn't want to muddy the waters even further. But trust me, the support is there. The majority of the board, or all of the board, wants to keep (Merred). We're happy with what he's done. The evidence of what he's done for the hospital is there."

At the meeting, the board voted to not allow hospital employees to produce information in response to a written or verbal request from Cornu-Labat; instead, the employees must refer the request to legal counsel.

Merred then told the board he felt as if the hospital will be able to overcome the difficulties it's currently facing.

"I'm not saying we're bulletproof," he said. "But I see people stepping up to create the team spirit that we need. We have a tremendous team here. Yes, there are areas in which we can improve, and we're working on them every day."