

VA whistle-blower denied leave for conference

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ALBANY -- A pharmacist who reported alleged abuse of cancer patients at Stratton Veterans Affairs Medical Center claims hospital officials quashed his request to attend a medical conference where he is scheduled to lead a panel discussion on whistle-blowing.

Jeffrey Fudin, a clinical pharmacy specialist, said he was notified on Sept. 28 that his paid leave request was rejected. The notification came a day after state Assemblyman Ronald C. Tocci, Assembly Veterans Affairs Committee chairman, met with hospital officials regarding a government panel to examine patient-care issues.

Fudin is expected to be called to testify in front of the state panel.

Tocci confirmed Wednesday he had a meeting on Sept. 27 with hospital Director Mary-ellen Piche regarding patient-care issues.

"I assured her that what I was trying to do was not just point fingers ... but that there was going to be a coordinated attempt to make sure everything was done as good as it could possibly be (at Stratton)," said Tocci, a Westchester County Democrat. "I told her point blank I was definitely going to conduct some kind of formal hearing and I invited her to be a participant."

Tocci said he does not recall discussing Fudin or any other VA employees who might be asked to testify before the panel.

Fudin sought help from U.S. Rep. Michael McNulty, D-Green Island, claiming the hospital rejected his request for invalid reasons. McNulty's office is investigating.

Linda Blumenstock, a hospital spokeswoman, said she was prevented from talking about Fudin's request because of worker confidentiality. Blumenstock said the hospital could comment if Fudin signed a waiver allowing it. "It would not be in my best interest to sign that waiver," Fudin said.

Fudin contends pharmacists from other VA hospitals will attend the three-day conference, which begins Monday. "My supervisor said it was not official VA business and that it had no benefit to the agency or patient care," Fudin said.

Fudin's problems have been woven into the backdrop of an ongoing federal investigation of allegations that patients were used as unwitting guinea pigs in research.

In November, a federal grand jury in Albany handed up a 48-count indictment against a former Stratton researcher. The charges allege that at least one patient died and others suffered unnecessarily.

Fudin has claimed hospital officials began retaliating in 1995 after he warned administrators cancer patients were at risk. Brendan Lyons can be reached at 454-5547 or by e-mail at blyons@timesunion.com.