

Not vets, but still deemed heroes

Albany-- Memorial Day parade panel chooses Stratton's alleged whistle-blowers as grand marshals

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Two pharmacists who reported alleged abuses of cancer research patients at Stratton VA Medical Center Hospital have been selected as grand marshals of next month's Memorial Day Parade in Albany.

Anthony Mariano, who no longer works for the hospital but is fighting in federal court to get his job back, and Jeffrey Fudin, a clinical pharmacy specialist, formally accepted the invitation on Tuesday, according to area veterans officials.

Area veterans officials said the invitation honoring the two alleged whistle-blowers was well received by their members. Fudin and Mariano have no military experience, but veterans officials said it's not unusual for people without military experience to serve as grand marshals.

"If a person does something heroic in a war they get a medal. We feel that we can't give these two guys a medal but we can honor them by making them grand marshals of the parade," said Joe Pollicino, a Vietnam War veteran and chairman of the Albany Joint Veterans Committee.

Mariano and Fudin both declined comment. But, in records filed in a federal whistle-blower court, they claim that they faced years of retaliation by hospital administrators after reporting alleged medical protocol violations in the hospital's troubled cancer program. Fudin was later fired but had his job reinstated by a judge, a ruling the hospital is still fighting.

"The city of Albany always has a wonderful Memorial Day parade and the VA always enjoys participating in it," said Stratton VA spokeswoman Linda Blumenstock, who declined further comment.

Seven years ago, Fudin warned hospital and Veterans Affairs officials that cancer patients at Stratton VA were unduly suffering and at risk of dying prematurely because they were being given drugs in violation of medical protocol. At least one patient may have died as a result of the alleged practices, which included giving certain drugs to patients whose medical backgrounds did not fit the criteria for use of both experimental and FDA-approved drugs, according to hospital and court records.

Fudin's allegations, which were later supported by Mariano, who was the hospital's pharmacy director at the time, became public only recently. The new information raises questions about how thoroughly federal officials investigated the troubled cancer

program at the Albany VA hospital before a criminal investigation of the research program began last year.

Hospital officials contend Fudin's allegations, which centered on former VA oncologist Dr. William Hrushesky, are not related to the federal criminal investigation. But some hospital workers have disputed that, contending veterans in the cancer program unwittingly may have been used as guinea pigs for years.

The criminal investigation centers on two researchers who authorities said may face possible manslaughter charges if it can be shown they altered medical records of cancer patients, including those of as many as five who may have died after being given experimental drugs.

The researchers, Dr. James Holland and Paul H. Kornak, no longer work at the VA and have declined comment. Authorities also are investigating whether Kornak should have been hired as a clinical researcher at the VA in 1999. At the time, his medical license had been revoked, and in 1993 he pleaded guilty to federal mail fraud charges in connection with the alleged forgery of a medical license application, records show.

On May 26, Fudin and Mariano, the son of a decorated Korean and World War II Marine Corps veteran, will march at the front of the parade before joining dignitaries on the reviewing stand to watch the remainder of the festivities.

"Anyone that works in a bureaucracy has to appreciate the courage it must have taken these two individuals to step forward and be counted as they saw something they perceived as being wrong," said Lawrence Wiest, the parade adjutant and past-president of the Tri-County Council of Vietnam Era Veterans.