

McNulty pushes for VA stories to be heard

Albany-- Congressman wants two pharmacists who reported corruption to testify before House panel

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First published: Tuesday, November 11, 2003

<http://www.timesunion.com/AspStories/story.asp?storyID=188380&category=ALBANY&BCCode=&newsdate=11/11/2003>

Two pharmacists who contend they suffered years of retaliation for reporting corruption at Stratton Veterans Affairs Medical Center Hospital could testify before a congressional subcommittee.

U.S. Rep. Michael J. McNulty, D-Green Island, said he met with one of the pharmacists over the weekend and now wants Veterans Administration Secretary Anthony Principi and a House veterans subcommittee to hear the men's stories.

McNulty's two-hour meeting with Anthony Mariano, Stratton's former pharmacy director, came less than a week after a former Stratton cancer researcher was arraigned in federal court on a 48-count felony indictment, including charges of manslaughter, criminally negligent homicide and fraud.

"I just have decided to ratchet things up a little bit," McNulty said. "On Friday, I formally requested in writing to Principi to have a meeting with Tony. ... This has gone on too long and that might force the bureaucracy of the VA to respond."

Mariano and Jeffrey Fudin, another pharmacist, went to the FBI in Albany four years ago and outlined accusations of corruption at Stratton. As early as 1995, they said, patients with cancer and other illnesses had been placed at risk -- or had died -- because of the way experimental drugs were being used. Patients also were enrolled in drug studies without signing consent forms indicating they had been informed about the risk, they said.

In addition, Mariano claims that he was retaliated against for speaking out when the VA began switching some patients to cheaper versions of certain prescription drugs several years ago, placing some patients at risk.

"It is the first time that I sat down with Tony and have gone through all this information and I'm glad I did it," McNulty said.

U.S. Rep. Steve Buyer, R-Ind., chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, directed questions Monday to the subcommittee's staff director, Arthur Wu.

"I do not believe there's been a conversation between Mr. McNulty and Chairman Buyer, but we would be willing to look at the issues," Wu said.

Fudin declined comment on Monday. But in a letter delivered to McNulty's office on Monday, Fudin indicated he would testify before Congress if he is granted protection.

"I am asking that Mr. McNulty arrange for me to have complete immunity to release information to the public and grant me federal whistle-blowing protection," Fudin stated in the letter.

Mariano said he would welcome a meeting with Buyer and also would testify before the House subcommittee if asked.

On Oct. 29, former Stratton cancer researcher Paul H. Kornak, 52, of Clifton Park, was indicted by a federal grand jury on charges he forged dozens of medical records in order to enroll veterans in drug studies for which they didn't qualify.

The allegations at Stratton first surfaced publicly last year and led to sweeping changes at VA hospitals, including tighter background checks on prospective workers.