

LETTERS

A Hospital "Bill of Rights"

To the Editor:

As a member of Norfolk District I follow your columns with great interest. Particularly provocative was the recent editorial entitled "American Justice: Hospital Brand".

There exists a great need for the establishment by the Society of a committee to investigate infringements of the rights of individual physicians by hospital boards. As presently constituted, boards have on occasion been arbitrarily unjust in their handling of certain situations, by virtue of a defect in hospital organization the correction of which warrants serious consideration.

A recent flagrant case involves a man widely recognized for his accomplishment in atomic medical research. A graduate of Harvard Medical School, class of 1929, he has served two of Harvard's affiliated hospitals continuously from 1931 to 1949, a period of 18 years, except for an interim of 40 months "on leave of absence for military service". He is trained in the field of application of isotopes to cancer research, etc. The cost of re-training a similar man is conservatively stated by the Atomic Energy Commission as close to one-half million dollars.

Despite the dire shortage of well trained personnel in this field, this man was dropped from the hospital in which he served as an associate in medicine and medical research, and was denied a hearing.

A recent issue of the *J.A.M.A.*, (Jul. 16, 1949, page 961), records that the House of Delegates of the A.M.A. requested that committees be organized at both county and state level for the purpose of hearing appeals from members who have come to misunderstanding with hospital boards. Some of our hospitals are so constituted that a virtual "one-man" rule exists. Frequently boards of trustees and administrators are "bull-dozed" into actions which they abhor. They are required to make decisions on the basis of prepared evidence on matters on which they are neither equipped to deliberate, nor upon which they should properly be called to adjudicate.

Our American democracy is based upon a series of checks and balances between administrative, judicial, and representative bodies. We have fought wars to maintain this concept. As citizens we must all interest ourselves in the maintenance of these rights and privileges; as doctors we should be especially interested that these same principles be extended to include the relations between the medical profession and the hospitals it serves.

The "hospital brand of justice" now often meted out in quarters close to Norfolk is not in accord with our American traditions of justice for all. There would be less clamor for nationalization of our profession if the organization within which we function were entirely healthy, vigorously democratic, and fully in accord with the principles governing our civic life. The public and many of our own representatives appreciate these weak spots in our organization and cry out for a change. We need to meet such criticisms and the challenge to put our house in order. The recent action of the A.M.A. is a most encouraging step toward this goal. I hope that Norfolk will lead the way in implementing a vigorous supporting program in the months to come.

The lay boards of our hospitals need the type of help outlined below: 1) Appraisal of the deep responsibility which they hold as the final arbiters on deeply cogent matters; 2) more frequent consultation with constituted agencies of the county medical societies in important policy matters governing the physicians' rights; 3) impartial fact finding and weighing of the evidence, followed by a truly democratic hearing of any accused physician, in the case of major disagreement on the part of junior physicians with their superiors; 4) right of appeal by a society member to his local or state society, at all times.

I am airing these suggestions in your columns, for I feel sure that serious discussion of these matters will lead to constructive action.

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