

Clinic Says It Was Told Doctor Had Brain Ailment

By EDWARD WONG

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A Queens abortion clinic that hired a doctor who had been suspended by a hospital for carving his initials into a patient's stomach was told by a psychiatrist that the doctor apparently suffered from a brain disorder, the clinic president acknowledged yesterday.

A few days after the doctor, Allan Zarkin, 61, began work at the clinic, clinic officials received a letter from a psychiatrist hired by Dr. Zarkin's lawyer saying that the doctor apparently suffered from a frontal lobe disorder. The psychiatrist, Dr. Mark Mills, said that Dr. Zarkin was still able to "evaluate and treat patients" but that his work should be carefully monitored.

Dr. Mills also noted in the letter that another brain specialist "believes that any unsupervised clinical conduct may be inappropriate."

Dr. Zarkin's lawyer has suggested that his client's brain disorder, possibly Pick's disease, led to the bizarre incident at Beth Israel Medical Center on Sept. 7 in which he carved his initials into the abdomen of a woman on whom he had just performed a Caesarean section.

Merle Hoffman, president of Choices Women's Medical Center in Long Island City, said she knew nothing of that incident when she hired Dr. Zarkin as medical director beginning Nov. 1.

Dr. Zarkin's predecessor at the Queens clinic told about a dozen clinic workers days before Dr. Zarkin started that he had heard of the carving incident, clinic employees and the former director said. But Ms. Hoffman said she first heard of the incident on Dec. 28.

The patient at Beth Israel, Dr. Liana Gedz, and her husband have filed a \$5.5 million lawsuit against Beth Israel, Dr. Zarkin and his former practice, and Dr. Zarkin is being investigated by the State Health Department and the Manhattan district attorney's office.

After being dismissed from his former Murray Hill practice and resigning from the hospital, Dr. Zarkin worked as medical director at Choices until Dec. 28, when Ms. Hoffman fired him after reading a court summons related to the carving and resulting lawsuit. Ms. Hoffman, who employed Dr. Zarkin part time at her clinic from 1983 to 1991, said her clinic had four part-time obstetrician gynecologists and performed 15,000 abortions per year.

The letter sent by Dr. Mills makes no reference to the carving incident, but recommends that Dr. Mahin Hassibi, a clinic psychiatrist, meet with Dr. Zarkin on a weekly basis to assess his brain functions, "judgment and ability to focus." Dr. Mills also said in the letter that his "perspectives" about Dr. Zarkin were "somewhat limited" because he evaluated but did not treat Dr. Zarkin.

"The flag that it raised was that I had Dr. Hassibi meet with him regularly," Ms. Hoffman said.

Even before Dr. Zarkin came on board, Dr. Enayat Hakim Elahi, the departing medical director, told clinic employees at a gathering on Oct. 28 that he had heard a rumor about the carving incident, Dr. Elahi and several clinic workers said yesterday.

"They were asking me about him and whether I knew about him," Dr. Elahi said. "But I didn't know that he had been dismissed from Beth Israel. Something like this never happens in medicine." Dr. Elahi said he found the rumor so incredible that he did not report it to Ms. Hoffman, assuming that it would reach her through other staff members.

Dr. Elahi, who has filed many complaints about conditions at Choices with the State Health Department, recently sent the agency a letter accusing Dr. Zarkin of botching a gynecological procedure that was performed on Nov. 4 under "extremely unsafe conditions."

He said he did not witness the operation but was told about it by former colleagues. Clinic employees confirmed the incident, and added that Dr. Zarkin repeatedly failed to complete surgical procedures and had to be helped by other doctors.

Ms. Hoffman contended that Dr. Elahi held a grudge against her and that she did not hear of Dr. Zarkin's having problems with any surgeries.

Ms. Hoffman said that her clinic, founded in 1971, brought in \$10 million in gross revenues annually. The State Health Department began an investigation in November that is looking at quality of care and employee-screening issues related to the clinic, officials said. Health officials added that from 1996 to 1999, they found several deficiencies in the clinic and its laboratories.

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