

Doctor's license suspended

COLLEEN MURPHY: She is known as a champion of women's health.

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Anchorage Daily News

Published: July 8th, 2005
Last Modified: July 9th, 2005 at 01:07 AM

The Alaska State Medical Board suspended the license of a well-known women's health advocate Thursday, citing a hospital report that she failed to meet minimum standards for obstetric care.

The board members removed Dr. Colleen Murphy's license at an emergency meeting without first giving her a hearing because they deemed she posed a "clear and immediate danger to the public health and safety."

Murphy said after the suspension that she believes it was politically motivated.

The board action stemmed from Alaska Regional Hospital's decision to cancel Murphy's obstetric privileges after a committee review of hospital records for 10 patients, said the written suspension notice from the state Division of Occupational Licensing.

After reviewing the 2004 records and interviewing Murphy, the hospital committee concluded she failed to meet the minimum standard of care for five of the 10 patients, citing inappropriate technique during a vaginal delivery, delayed response when caring for patients, and other concerns, the notice said. The committee's report was not made public.

Paul Stockler, Murphy's attorney, said neither he nor Murphy knew a suspension hearing had been set. However, the doctor knew she was being investigated. The suspension document says a state investigator asked Murphy earlier this year to voluntarily stop practicing obstetrics until Alaska Regional had finished its review of her work. She declined.

The medical board does not have to notify doctors about an emergency hearing to remove their medical license, said Leslie Gallant, the medical board's executive administrator. Stockler said he intends to ask for a hearing, as state law allows.

Murphy said Thursday that she's heartbroken that her license has been removed. She believes she's an asset, not a threat, to the public, she said.

"I don't have anything to be ashamed of."

Murphy said patients cited in the reviewed medical records are still a part of her private medical practice on Lake Otis Parkway.



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Anchorage Daily News

Stockler said he hopes the decision to remove Murphy's license wasn't a political one, but Murphy said she thought it was.

"I'm not afraid to speak up," she said. "Some people admire me for it, and some people don't like me for it. I guess some people don't like me right now."

In recent years, Murphy has talked publicly about increasing insurance coverage for birth control, making it easier for women to get emergency contraception, and the abortion pill.

The decision to suspend Murphy's license was made during a teleconference that was mostly closed to the public. Five of the board's seven members participated.

Neither Gallant nor investigator Colin Matthews would say why the board called for an emergency meeting instead of waiting to deal with the matter at its next regular board meeting, scheduled for later this month in Petersburg. Murphy said Thursday that she was already planning to testify at that meeting about a proposed change to an emergency contraception program.

With little public comment, board members Dr. John Duddy of Anchorage and Dr. Bert Flaming of Glennallen and public members Michael Tauriainen of Soldotna and Nancy Puckett of Anchorage voted Thursday to suspend Murphy's medical license immediately. Only physician assistant Ed Hall voted against the action, saying he thought a partial suspension of her obstetric practice should be considered. The governor recently appointed Hall and Puckett to the board.

Murphy's obstetric privileges at Alaska Regional were restricted in April, state documents said. At the time, Stockler said, Murphy requested a hospital hearing about the matter, which is set for early August. Stockler said he couldn't understand why the medical board removed her license Thursday -- more than three months after Alaska Regional restricted her privileges but three weeks before the hospital hearing.

Murphy, 49, has been licensed in Alaska since 1993, Gallant said. During that time, she has received mixed reviews: She's been let go from key medical positions but has also been applauded as a patient advocate and champion of women's health. The YWCA named her one of its "Women of Achievement." Murphy also won the Public Health Service Outstanding Service Medal.

Patients have stood by Murphy when others questioned her work. At times, they have flooded the Daily News editorial pages with letters of support, calling her a life-saver, "irreplaceable" and "the kindest doctor" ever known.

In early 1999, however, the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium terminated Murphy's position as its statewide women's health consultant. At the time, consortium administrators would not comment on why, saying it was a personnel matter.

As of Thursday, Murphy had obstetric privileges at Providence Alaska Medical Center, but she has not had privileges at Alaska Native Medical Center or the Anchorage Native Primary Care Center for at least the past several years, spokeswomen for the medical centers said.

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