

Sexism alleged at hospital

By Marcella Bombardieri, Globe Staff | January 28, 2005

Two female doctors are alleging that they were the victims of discrimination and retaliation in the anesthesia department of Brigham and Women's Hospital, and an internal evaluation last year found that many women in the department believed they were excluded from decision-making and denied leadership opportunities.

Dr. Nadia Salama Ibrahim Nathan, an anesthesiologist, filed a complaint with the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination saying that she was punished for speaking her mind, subjected to routine sexual jokes and comments about her appearance, and ultimately put on unpaid leave for complaining.

The hospital disputes Nathan's charges and says it has taken steps to implement the recommendations of the internal study.

A former anesthesia resident, Dr. Chante Buntin-Mushock, has also filed an MCAD complaint, saying she received repeated warnings that she was too outspoken. Buntin-Mushock, who had attempted to start a women's support group in the department, said she was fired the day after she took her concerns to an administrator outside her department.

"It's a culture where it's OK for a man to open his mouth, but not for a woman," Nathan said.

Both say they were also discriminated against for their race. Nathan is Egyptian; Buntin-Mushock is black and Asian.

Brigham and Women's, a Harvard University teaching hospital, declined to comment on Buntin-Mushock's allegations because it has not been officially notified of her MCAD complaint, filed Wednesday. Nathan's case was updated Wednesday, but was originally filed in October.

In December, the hospital filed an eight-page reply to the MCAD, arguing that Nathan was not discriminated against and that she was a disruptive and combative presence. The hospital says that Nathan "was regularly and excessively involved in professional conflicts with her colleagues" and that many colleagues believe she is "inappropriately attempting to play 'the gender card.' "

However, an internal assessment last year did find a widespread perception of inequality in the anesthesia department. A summary of the findings was obtained by lawyer Shannon Liss-Riordan, who represents Nathan and Buntin-Mushock.

Eileen Burke Sherman -- corporate director for employee and labor relations for Partners HealthCare, which runs the hospital -- did 28 confidential interviews with department members. Her report found a majority perception that women who "go along with views of males are more successful" and that women who speak up "are labeled aggressive."

Common perceptions were that women are "excluded from making decisions affecting [the] department as a whole," according to the report summary, and that "women are disadvantaged relative to leadership opportunities." The report, dated April 28, 2004, also said that very few

women held positions of authority within the department, with no vice chairwomen and only one woman on a faculty board.

The report also found that the perception is that sexual harassment and abusive behavior are not major problems, "with a few exceptions." It did not address those exceptions or any specific cases.

Sherman said in an interview that she carried out the assessment at the request of Dr. Charles Vacanti, chairman of the department of anesthesia. Her summary also says that "there is some appreciation of Dr. Vacanti's efforts to create a more positive climate with respect to gender."

As the head of the department, Vacanti is named in both doctors' MCAD complaints. He released a statement through the hospital saying "I am proud of our record hiring and promoting the best and most qualified women and men."

Sherman said Vacanti has followed up on the recommendations in her report. He brought in an outside specialist for mandatory training on respectful workplace behavior and promoted more women. Now there are four women on a faculty board of 11 and one woman vice chairwoman among four such positions. She also said that not all the women in the department said there was a problem. The hospital says about 28 of the 99 physicians in the department are women.

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