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JFK hospital reinstates high-risk heart surgeon

By Phil Galewitz, Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Friday, June 4, 2004

Dr. Lancelot "Lance" Lester, a top Palm Beach County heart surgeon who was suspended last summer by JFK Medical Center over "quality of care" issues, has been reinstated by the hospital.

Lester, who specializes in treating high-risk patients, is expected to be back in the operating room within a few weeks, hospital spokeswoman Madelyn Passarella said Thursday.

"This has been a difficult and dark period for me," said Lester, who received notice of his reinstatement last week. "My ability to help patients and the affection that they return was the fuel of my life."

A special physician committee at the Atlantis hospital reviewed Lester's performance and found his patient mortality rate was "acceptable," said Dr. Jack Zeltzer, JFK's chief of surgery.

Lester's patient mortality rate spiked in the year ending June 30, 2003, even after adjusting for the severity of his cases, according to state data compiled by the consulting firm Intellimed International Corp. Of the 335 patients Lester operated on in that 12-month period, 24 died during or shortly after surgery, although only 16 were expected to, according to the data.

Lester said the statistics do not accurately reflect how sick his patients were. He said he often operated on patients refused by other doctors because they were worried about their own mortality figures.

"There was information to vindicate me then and now," Lester said.

Zeltzer agreed with Lester about the difficulty in accounting for all the variables of a patient's condition to measure a doctor's patient mortality rate.

"Dr. Lester, in our community, has been known to be the surgeon of last resort in doing extremely high-risk cases," Zeltzer said.

Lester was reinstated after going through JFK's appeal system, Passarella said.

"All the issues have been resolved and with Lester returning, we are looking forward to enhancing our cardiac program," she said.

Without Lester, fewer heart patients sought surgery at JFK, Zeltzer said. The numbers of chest surgeries at the hospital, which include cardiac operations, fell by 13 percent to 910 cases in 2003 compared with 2002, according to Intellimed data. Overall, the total number of inpatient cases at the hospital fell by 3 percent to 24,911.

JFK's profit fell to \$11.9 million last year from \$17.5 million in 2002, according to the hospital's latest audit, which the state released Thursday. Revenue rose to \$312.7 million last year from \$289 million in 2002.

Passarella said the hospital had no economic motivation in restoring Lester's staff privileges.

Lester has worked exclusively at JFK since 1987, performing 380 open-heart operations there in his last full year in 2002.

Like most other doctors, Lester works as an independent contractor, not an employee of the hospital. JFK, owned by the nation's largest



hospital chain, HCA Inc., runs the biggest of three open-heart surgery programs in Palm Beach County.

Lester stopped working at JFK in June 2003 after a feud escalated with some anesthesiologists at the hospital who claimed Lester's operations took too long, sometimes more than 14 hours. That compares with the routine four or five hours for cardiac surgery.

The anesthesiologists and Lester refused to work with one another, forcing the administration to get involved.

In August, the hospital suspended Lester's practicing privileges. An attorney representing the hospital's anesthesiologists could not be reached for comment Thursday. The anesthesiologists group at the hospital came under new company management this year.

More than a dozen of the surgeon's patients and their families wrote letters to *The Palm Beach Post* after reading about his suspension -- all supporting Lester and his work.

JFK officials say the departure of longtime Chief Executive Officer Phil Robinson in February was not related to the decision to bring Lester back. Robinson was promoted to an HCA position in Richmond, Va., though he left that job last week, citing health reasons.

Lester said a few details need to be worked out before he will return, though he declined to elaborate.

Neither the hospital nor Lester would comment on whether JFK would pay Lester any money to make up for his months of lost income.

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