

Dual lines of authority

INCIDENT

James A. Grover, retired land developer and financier, is president of the Chiefland Memorial Hospital Board of Trustees. Chiefland Memorial is a 200-bed voluntary, short-term general hospital serving an area of approximately 50,000 persons. Grover has just begun a meeting with the hospital administrator, Edward M. Hoffman. The purpose of the meeting is to seek an acceptable solution to an apparent conflict-of-authority problem within the hospital between Hoffman and the chief of surgery, Dr. Lacy Young.

The problem was brought to Grover's attention by Young during a golf match between the two men. Young had challenged Grover to the golf match at the Chiefland Golf and Country Club, but it was only an excuse for Young to discuss a hospital problem with Grover.

The problem that concerned Young involved the operating room supervisor, Ms. Geraldine Werther. Werther, a registered nurse, schedules the hospital's operating suite according to policies that she "believes" were established by the hospital's administration. One source of irritation to the surgeons is her attitude of maximum utilization for the hospital's operating rooms to reduce hospital costs. She therefore schedules operations so that idle time is minimized. Surgeons complain that the operative schedule often does not permit them sufficient time to complete a surgical procedure in the manner they think desirable. All too often, there is insufficient time between operations for effective preparation of the operating room for the next procedure. Such scheduling, the surgical staff maintains, contributes to low-quality patient care. Furthermore, some surgeons have complained that Werther shows favoritism in her scheduling, allowing some doctors more use of the operating suite than others.

The situation reached a crisis when Young, following an explosive confrontation with Werther, told her he was firing her. Werther then made an appeal to the hospital administrator, who in turn informed Young that discharge of nurses was an administrative prerogative. In effect, Young was told he did not have the authority to fire Werther. But Young asserted that he did have authority over any issue affecting medical practice and good patient care in Chiefland Hospital. He considered this a medical problem and threatened to take the matter to the hospital's board of trustees.

When Grover and Hoffman met, Hoffman explained his position on the problem. He stressed the point that a hospital administrator is legally responsible for patient care in the hospital. He also contended that quality patient care cannot be achieved unless the board of trustees authorizes the administrator to make decisions, develop programs, formulate policies, and implement procedures. While listening to Hoffman, Grover recalled the belligerent position taken by Young, who contended that surgical and medical doctors holding staff privileges at Chiefland would never allow a "layman" to make decisions impinging on medical practice. Young also had said that Hoffman should be told to restrict his activities to fund-raising, financing, maintenance, and housekeeping—administrative problems rather than medical problems. Young had then requested that Grover clarify in a definitive manner the lines of authority at Chiefland Memorial.

As Grover ended his meeting with Hoffman, the severity of the problem was unmistakably clear to him, but the solution remained quite unclear. Grover knew a decision was required—and soon. He also recognized that the policies Werther professed to follow were only implied policies that had never been fully articulated, formally adopted by board action, or communicated to employees. He also intended to correct that situation.