

Colin Clarke, M.D.

June 1, 2011

Honorable William E. Reukauf
Associate Special Counsel
United States Office of Special Counsel
1730 M Street, N.W., Suite 218
Washington, D.C. 20036-4505

Re: OSC FILE D1-10-1024

Dear Mr. Reukauf:

I take this opportunity to comment on the events following my disclosure of safety concerns at Northport Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Northport, New York. As you are aware, those disclosures resulted in the removal of unqualified practitioners and the closure of an unaccredited training program. Because of OSC's prompt referral, and VA's decisive action, a serious threat to patient safety was avoided.

Unfortunately, events such as these tend to portray VA in a negative light, one that is at odds with VA's record of delivering high quality medical care to our nation's Veterans. Northport VA Medical Center is no exception. Having served there, first as a resident, then as a contract physician, and finally as an attending physician, I can attest to the high standard by which Northport VAMC cares for its patients.

There are, however, barriers to VA's successful recruitment and retention of highly qualified physicians. Primary among those is a conspicuous lack of job security, making it difficult to attract physicians in private practice. VA's physician staffing model exists outside of the civil service structure under which most Federal workers are employed. In theory VA's "excepted service" should streamline the administrative process by which VA physicians are hired and fired; VA can quickly and easily hire qualified doctors, and fire poor performers.

In practice, the "excepted service" system has had an unintended, negative effect on physician recruitment and retention. When VAMC leadership positions are held by physicians who permit a culture of mediocrity, dissenting physicians can be rapidly silenced and easily dismissed using the very personnel system created to discourage that culture. That is particularly apparent in the context of "whistleblowing," where physicians who voice legitimate patient-care concerns occasionally face retaliatory dismissal, with little or no procedural recourse.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Colin Clarke', with a stylized, cursive script.

Colin Clarke, M.D.