

The Virgin Islands Consortium

J.F.L. Board Places Okolo On Paid Administrative Leave

Health / **Published On May 06, 2016 10:56 AM /**

Ernice Gilbert **May 06, 2016**



ST. CROIX -- The Juan F. Luis Hospital's board meeting saw an unusual occurrence yesterday, as employees, most of whom had never attended a board meeting before, filled the hospital's third floor classroom, some with questions related to a tax filing error caused by the hospital's accounting team, while others were concerned with employees being overworked. But most of the employees who waited well over an hour while board members discussed general hospital operations, wanted to know one thing: what is the status of Dr. Ken Okolo.

Ever since it was revealed that Dr. Okolo's doctorate degree was from the unaccredited college Century University, rumors have been swirling about his future at the hospital.

The Consortium received numerous inquiries -- some expressing frustration that the publication hadn't reported that Dr. Okolo had been fired; a rumor that simply was not true.

Following a lengthy executive session meeting discussing Dr. Okolo's fate, board chairman Troy deChabert Schuster told reporters that the new CEO -- who took the reigns after former CEO Dr. Kendall Griffith [stepped down](#) in November, 2015 -- was placed on administrative leave with pay. Mr. Schuster said the hospital's counsel, attorney Richard Evangelista, was given the temporary role of administrator in charge until a decision on Dr. Okolo is reached.

In explaining why Dr. Okolo was placed on administration leave, Mr. Schuster wouldn't say much, only allowing, "we're discussing his contract." Mr. Schuster said the discussions had nothing to do with Dr. Okolo's defunct doctorate degree. And pressed on why did the territorial board took the stance of requiring that the St. Croix board reconsider Dr. Okolo's contract, Mr. Schuster did not divulge much, either: "They just asked us to reconsider the conversation and reenter negotiations of his contract, so that's what we're doing."



Asked how long the paid administrative leave would last, Mr. Schuster said, "it could be days."

While Mr. Schuster spoke to the media, Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly, who had recently appeared in the room, told Mr. Schuster that something urgently needed to be done about the hospital's emergency room, which has been understaffed.

"You have a crisis in the emergency room," Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly said. "You only have one doctor, you've got a ton of babies down there, you have no rooms to put them for treatment -- you've got to send somebody downstairs." Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly's complaint was one of the issues discussed during the open board meeting, where at least one employee said she and her colleagues were being overworked and needed help.

"You were talking about people abusing the system and taking leave, but I just want the board to understand that we are really short-staffed, and there's a lot of people in here who are overworked. And I don't think that people are taking leave because they want not to work or they want to be out there. I could only speak for me, if I take leave it's because I really deserve it. We are short-staffed and it's the same people doing the same work over and over again. We are human beings; we are not puppets," said Annette Joquin, an emergency room employee. Ms. Joquin was responding to a report by J.F.L.'s

Human Resource Committee that revealed some employees had taken leave well passed what was allowed by the hospital's own rules and Virgin Island Code. One particular employee, Mr. Evangelista revealed, had been out on leave since March, 2015, and was receiving benefits paid for by J.F.L.

The board deliberated Dr. Okolo's fate at length during the executive session, according to Mr. Schuster. He said all aspects of the contract had been considered and there were more discussions to be had as the board attempts to finalize whether to keep Dr. Okolo, let him go or lower his salary.

But Dr. Okolo's fate, it seemed, was influenced by Ms. Joquin and other employees who came in support of the fledgling CEO.

"We do deserve to know what is going with Dr. Okolo because we liked him," Ms. Joquin said. "You see, we know what we have; we don't know what we're going to get."

She continued: "Whatever you all decide, whatever salary you all give him, we still want him. We want him here, let him finish what he was doing. He started something, let him finish. You can't just stop driving in the middle of the road and say, 'no, we don't want this car no more.' You have to finish -- give him a chance."

Ms. Joquin's remarks received cheers from most employees at the meeting, and it may well wound up being a major factor in the board's final decision regarding Dr. Okolo.