

OPINION

PASADENA STAR-NEWS

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Editorial was right

Re "Revamp county health services":

The Star-News' assessment is correct — it is without a doubt time for the county supervisors to let go of the Department of Health Services. It was this belief that motivated me to file a citizen's complaint on Aug. 1, 2004 with the L.A. Civil Grand Jury, and that led to the Civil Grand Jury issuing its decision that the supervisors should cede control of the health services to an independent health authority.

However, the newspaper's conclusion that Dr. Garthwaite was somehow prevented from having absolute control, especially as it applies to KDMC, is not entirely correct.

For the past three years Garthwaite has had complete control over the progress of KDMC. He chose all three sets of consultants (two which failed, and the third appears to be failing), he hand-picked a team of DHS experts and with them spent a year on the ground at King-Drew Medical Center (during which time matters only seemed to worsen). Through all this, the board gave him *carte blanche*.

Some have argued that KDMC had a history of problems. That could be true; however, it does not mean that substantial and substantive change could not be realized in the three years KDMC was under Garthwaite's direct, day-to-day control. Quite the contrary, in health care, good, competent management and leadership can realize change in a short period of time, sometimes in less than six months — the operative word here being good and competent management and leadership.

But this time the supervisors were overly lax, allowing Garthwaite to misrepresent the progress of the hospital, selecting a consulting firm that had no published track record in achieving the wide-ranging changes that were being asked of KDMC, and finally allowing him to retain salaried consultants even after they admitted that they would probably

fail in preparing the hospital to pass its next inspection.

We can blame the supervisors for not having fired Garthwaite sooner. Instead they kept him as his lack of leadership continued to hobble progress in the hospital and at DHS.

Instead of getting a new DHS head, they should focus their efforts on putting in motion the elements necessary to form an independent health authority and leave the selection of a chief to that body. But since these five kings rarely show any respect for the public's will, we the people will probably have to first redistrict our county, elect new and more responsive individuals to the new board, and make it clear that their first priority should be the health authority.

Geneviève M. Clavreul
PASADENA

Revamp county health services

IT'S time county supervisors face the facts: They aren't qualified to run the second-largest public health-care agency in the nation. They must let go control of the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services for the good of the more than 17,000 patients it treats each year.

The county grand jury has recommended supervisors turn management of the agency that includes four hospitals and remaining community clinics over to an independent authority with health-care expertise.

Director Dr. Thomas Garthwaite was the latest victim of the scandal-plagued department, resigning last month under fire for unresolved troubles at Martin Luther King Jr./Drew Medical Center.

The former chief medical officer for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Garthwaite was no neophyte manager, yet supervisors never gave him the authority to make the tough decisions necessary in a department saddled with deficits and increasingly under fire for inadequate care at King/Drew and County-USC medical centers.

When patient deaths at King/Drew proved largely due to negligence and poorly trained personnel, the community labeled the findings racist and called for Garthwaite's firing instead.

Rep. Maxine Waters added fuel to the fire, calling Garthwaite's management the culprit, rather than the obvious inadequacies of oversight and personnel at King/Drew.

Sadly, it was this attitude

OUR VIEW

It's time Los Angeles County Supervisors relinquish control of the Department of Health Services in the interests of those whom the system serves.

that allowed problems at King/Drew to fester over the years as supervisors distanced themselves from such furor. Despite years in the making, those problems were laid at Garthwaite's door, and he simply could not overcome them.

Supervisors joined the community in blaming Garthwaite as they had his predecessors, Robert Gates and

Mark Finucane, who also served as highly paid scapegoats.

Garthwaite, however, managed to close the King/Drew trauma center in an effort to recoup costs and save the remainder of the hospital, but it was too little too late. King/Drew lost

accreditation, and federal funding loss could follow.

If the department is ever to overcome crippling deficits expected to reach more than \$800 million over the next three years, Supervisors must relinquish control over this juiciest of political plums because it really isn't about jobs, votes and campaign contributions from health-care employee unions. It's about people — people who come to the county's hospitals as a last resort, most without insurance or even the wherewithal to afford any but rudimentary health care. County health care is their only lifeline.

Supervisors, don't let down this most vulnerable of constituencies. Do your jobs by handing county health care to those with the know-how.

You may just save lives along with money. Who knows, maybe you'll earn back the public's trust with such an unselfish, nonpolitical move.