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YOUR OPINIONS

Wasn't scapegoated

Re "County health chief resigns"
(Nov. 30):

Dr. Thomas Garthwaite hasn't been scapegoated. Quite the opposite, the supervisors have allowed Garthwaite to misrepresent the progress of the multimillion-dollar consultants, to withhold critical information from them and to portray himself as the county's CMO when he is not licensed to practice medicine in California, etc.

If Garthwaite were the astute public servant that your reporter attempts to paint him, Garthwaite would've done his due diligence and known what a hornet's nest the Health Department was. He accepted the job with its perks and risks; so let's not shed any tears for him. His administration is defined by his glaring lack of leadership and ethics. The time is now to create a Health Authority. So let's all roll up our sleeves and get to work.

— Genevieve M. Clavreul, R.N.
Pasadena

County health chief resigns
Garthwaite is third to quit under fire since 1995
By Troy Anderson, Staff Writer

Dr. Thomas Garthwaite, the embattled head of Los Angeles County's troubled health department, resigned Tuesday and said he will become chief medical officer at Catholic Health Care East in Pennsylvania.

Garthwaite, a nationally respected physician who has endured weekly grillings by the Board of Supervisors over his handling of patient deaths at Martin Luther King Jr./Drew Medical Center, joins at least two other county health directors who resigned under fire in recent years.

"I wasn't expecting it, but it wasn't a surprise," Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky said. "I think there's been a lot of criticism of him. There's been a lot of scapegoating of him."

Former Department of Health Services Director Mark Finucane resigned in 2001 as part of a mutual decision with the supervisors. Finucane, who was regarded as a survivor for having remained as head of the department after it nearly collapsed in 1995, had frequently clashed with the supervisors.

Finucane replaced embattled health director Robert Gates, who led the department for 11 years. At the time in 1995, county officials said they likely would have fired Gates if he had not retired.

Dr. Daniel Higgins, past president of the Los Angeles County Medical Association, said he's shocked and saddened by the latest director's decision to resign.

"I guess he's just in a situation trying to deal with a broken health care system that unfortunately nobody has been successful with," Higgins said. "These guys are put in a pressure-cooker and told to fix it. And it's basically run by a political committee that is trying to run what is a big business and it doesn't work."

Assemblyman Mark Ridley-Thomas, D-Los Angeles, who has sponsored legislation to create a health authority to oversee the health department and an inspector general to root out waste, fraud and abuse, said Garthwaite's resignation bolsters the need for an independent panel to oversee the department.

"There has to be a better way to govern health care in Los Angeles County," Ridley-Thomas said. "The entire process has to be de-politicized. There needs to be a way to insulate the director without diminishing transparency. What we have now is indefensible."

Garthwaite, a 30-year public employee who was credited with reforming the Department of Veterans Affairs during his tenure in the late 1990s and expanding access to 600,000 additional veterans, said the job in Newtown Square is a great opportunity.

"They are a large health care system that is interested in defining themselves by quality and safety, and those are the two things I care most passionately about," said Garthwaite, 58, who took the reins of the health department in 2002.

Garthwaite is expected to stay at his job until early next year and help the board find a replacement.

Tony Bell, spokesman for Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich, who had repeatedly called for Garthwaite's resignation in recent months, said, "We wish him well."

Antonovich has been upset that Garthwaite recommended that the county hire a consulting firm for \$50 million to fix problems at MLK and yet Garthwaite has been unable to implement reforms to prevent patient deaths and other lapses in care at the South Los Angeles hospital.

In recent months, the hospital has lost accreditation, hired almost all-new senior management and fired and disciplined hundreds of employees.

"I would have rather seen him stay until after all the (accreditation) issues were resolved at King, but I recognize he was in a very difficult position and I knew he was looking for other positions," said Supervisor Yvonne Brathwaite Burke.

City News Service contributed to this story.

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