

Learning Activities

CASE: No African Americans Allowed—White Patient’s Racism Rules at Pennsylvanian Hospital

African American workers at a major Pennsylvania Hospital were outraged when told they were not to enter the room of a white patient.

Supervisors at the nationally recognized hospital told its African American healthcare professionals, as well as food service and house-keeping staff, not to enter the patient’s room or interact with the family.

Administrators said they broke hospital policy to avoid a potentially “volatile situation” by adhering to the request of the patient’s husband, that only white employees enter his wife’s room on the maternity ward.

“We were wrong,” said a vice president at Abington Memorial Hospital. “We should have followed our policy. The whole incident has greatly upset many of our employees who perceived that we were acquiescing to the family’s wishes.”

Despite the hospital’s policy that states “care will be provided on a nondiscriminatory basis,” it seems as though patients are allowed to discriminate.

Catholic Health Care West’s medical ethicist said the hospital failed in its responsibility to its employees and the community in order to accommodate a patient’s racial preference.

“This was a fundamental disrespect of these professionals’ skills and their fundamental dignities . . . a hospital needs to stand against this undercurrent of racism in our society.”

The Philadelphia office of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) said that prohibiting African American employees from carrying out the full scope of their duties is reprehensible.

“I don’t see why and how a hospital could justify accommodating a request that the professionals attending to a patient be of a particular background,” said Barry Morrison, director of the Philadelphia chapter of the ADL. “Certainly, it’s demoralizing for the people who work there.”

The American Hospital Association (AHA) acknowledged there have been several similar instances its staff knows about and that there are no fixed industry guidelines for hospitals to follow when such a request is made.

With nearly 5000 hospitals as members, the Chicago-based AHA is the largest hospital association in the United States. It would not offer hospitals a suggestion as to how to address that situation.

The supervisors at Abington Memorial were acting with good intentions and sought to deflect any confrontation between its African American staff and the white family. There was no incident reported during the woman’s stay.

Since then, the hospital's president sent a letter to all its employees and volunteers apologizing for the situation, which he termed "morally reprehensible."

In addition to creating a diversity task force at the 508-bed hospital, which is located in Abington and services patients from Philadelphia and the surrounding primarily white suburbs in Bucks and Montgomery counties, it has hired consultants, and the hospital is revising its anti-discrimination policy.

Earlier in the year, the AHA bestowed upon the hospital the "Quest for Quality" award for raising awareness of the need for an organizational commitment to patient safety and quality.

AHA said hospitals are constantly evaluating how to provide the best treatment for their patients, while protecting and maintaining the dignity of its employees. They also said that a hospital's constant patient turnover sometimes subjected workers to society's underbelly.

Question to ponder: How do culture, values, and ethics come into play in this case? If you were the leader of this organization, how would you handle this situation?

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