



## Look to the top

*A report on the cancer study scandal at Stratton VA hospital is eye-opening*

*First published: Thursday, September 1, 2005*

What did top officials at Stratton Veterans Affairs Medical Center Hospital know, and when did they know it? What did top officials at the Department of Veterans Affairs know, and when did they know it? Those questions have lingered ever since the first public reports of wrongdoing in the hospital's cancer research program emerged several years ago.

And now come the answers. According to records obtained by this newspaper, and outlined in a Sunday article by reporter Brendan Lyons, the paper trail goes all the way to the top. That should be a wake-up call for federal investigators, who, for reasons that are difficult to fathom, seemed to have focused most of their efforts on one researcher.

Yet, according to a 1998 report by an independent review team that has only now become public, many loose ends remain. The report, signed by Dr. Harold S. Ballard, head of the cancer program at New York Veterans Affairs Medical Center in New York City, was sent to the VA's Office of Inspector General and to Dr. Lawrence H. Flesh, then medical director at Stratton. But it's not clear, even now, if the inspector general's office ever followed up. Dr. Flesh isn't talking.

This is unacceptable. Some veterans who were enrolled in the cancer research program died, and an attorney representing their families believes the blame goes all the way to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. The timeline predates the arrival of the independent review team at Stratton in 1998. Three years before then, a researcher had filed a formal complaint against Stratton's former oncology chief, Dr. William Hrushesky, charging him with altering the result of research studies. A pharmacist, Jeffrey Fudin, also accused Dr. Hrushesky of prescribing drugs outside protocols,

possibly as a form of research and without patients' consent. At the time, Stratton officials reacted by trying to foist blame on Mr. Fudin.

So far, the only Stratton employee to face justice has been Paul Kornak, a convicted felon (no background checks were required by law at the time) who was hired by Dr. Hrushesky as director of recruiting veterans for drug studies. He was accused of forging backgrounds of veterans to enroll them in those studies and was found guilty of negligent homicide and fraud.

But what of the others involved? There is no sign that anyone else has faced any criminal charges, or if they have been cleared. There is no indication that the charge against Dr. Hrushesky of manipulating research data was ever pursued. He's now director of research at a VA hospital in South Carolina. Nor is there any indication that the superiors who tried to discredit Mr. Fudin, the whistle-blower, and his boss at the time, Anthony Mariano, were either disciplined or exonerated. At the moment, the only other figure to face some penalty is Dr. James A. Holland, who served as Stratton's oncology chief and was Mr. Kornak's supervisor. He was fired in 2002. But though he was identified by the U.S. attorney's office as a target of a criminal investigation in 2003, no charges have ever been filed. Dr. Holland declined to comment to our reporter.

"Conflicting data, conflicting statements, conflicting perspectives and an atmosphere of tension," is how Dr. Ballard described Stratton in 1998. In short, a tangled web that federal authorities have an obligation to unravel -- completely.