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Latrobe man's medical school in Caribbean is target of probe

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By
TRIBUNE-REVIEW
Monday, January 1, 2007

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FEDERATION of ST. KITTS and NEVIS -- Government officials in this tiny Caribbean nation are investigating a medical school started by a Latrobe man who was fired from another school for falsifying his academic credentials.

[St. Theresa's Medical University](#) opened last year in St. Kitts, where Thomas M. Uhrin holds himself out as a doctor even though he has admitted he did not complete medical training and has never been licensed as a physician.

Uhrin, 43, of 17 Barbara Road, the chancellor and executive dean, has not responded to repeated requests to discuss the school attended by a dozen students last semester. In the British West Indies, St. Theresa's is more than 2,400 miles away from its headquarters in Latrobe, where Uhrin's employees field phone calls, collect mail from a post office box and handle admissions applications, financial information, advising and faculty hiring, according to its Web site, staff and students.



Thomas M. Uhrin

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Although St. Theresa's has yet to graduate a class, government officials said they are concerned about Uhrin and the education he is offering there.



Health Minister Rupert Herbert said officials are investigating allegations and questions related to the extent of Uhrin's medical training and validity of his professional credentials.

"We want reputable schools," Herbert said.

Shawna Lake, chairman of the Ministry of Education's accreditation board, would not discuss specifics of a complaint that led to her board's separate ongoing investigation into the

school accredited to confer bachelor of science, master of medicine, doctor of medicine, doctor of pharmacology and doctor of philosophy degrees. She said no action will be taken against St. Theresa's until the investigation is completed.

"If information is brought to our attention that (a school) is not legitimate, there is no hesitation in pulling the cord," Lake said. "Education has become a big money-making thing, but we have a responsibility to the students."

Staff said Uhrin taught a class for pharmacy students in the fall semester that ended Dec. 19.

Administrative assistant Dion Bass said about a dozen students are enrolled in classes taught in a sunny yellow ranch home located several blocks from the downtown center of Basseterre, the island's capital. There is a small lunchroom, a room with several faculty desks and a library that had about 100 books in September.

There is a security officer's booth that is manned day and night, a yard and a parking area for several cars. An anatomy laboratory is located in a second ranch home outside the gates and across a rear alley.

According to the school's Web site, students pay tuition of \$6,500 per 15-week semester for basic medical sciences courses and \$8,500 per 12-week semester for clinical sciences.

"Lord help those kids that are there. I don't know what they're getting," said R.J. Simms, of Boca Raton, Fla., vice president of administration and finance at the International University of the Health Sciences in St. Kitts.

Simms said Uhrin was terminated in September 2004 from the university that provides the bulk of its instruction online after it was revealed he lied about earning a doctoral degree and other matters.

"You always have a target on your back when you are a Caribbean medical school. We're working to improve things. Tom Uhrin isn't someone we wanted to be in charge of a medical school," Simms said.

Records show Uhrin graduated in 1985 from St. Vincent College near Latrobe with a degree in religious studies and later earned a master's degree in education from Duquesne University. He said he also earned a doctor of medicine degree in February 1999 from Central American Health Sciences University, but that could not be confirmed because registrar Martha Castillo said student information is not public record at the school, which has campuses in Belize and Mexico.

In a professional portrait in St. Theresa's reception area, Uhrin is wearing a stethoscope and white physician's lab coat embroidered with his name and the designation "M.D."

Appearances aside, in 1999 he admitted his training is incomplete. He publicly apologized for being misleading and resigned as medical director of a Greensburg clinic after a Tribune-Review investigation revealed he had not completed medical training and was never licensed.

The newspaper contacted campuses but found no records to support Uhrin's claim that he'd earned a doctoral degree in philosophy from the University of Health Sciences, College of Medicine, United Kingdom, Wales. Uhrin also admitted that his certificate of completion for a post-doctoral fellowship in molecular pharmacology was produced on a friend's computer.

His past surfaced during St. Theresa's accreditation process.

Lake said the dean of a medical school "is not necessarily required" to be a practicing physician but must have acceptable background experience in medicine and a doctorate in a related field. She said the accreditation board sought legal advice when questions were raised about Uhrin's academic background and his lack of a medical license.

"He had official-looking, notarized documents that were provided to us," Lake said.

Vernon S. Veira, an attorney in St. Kitts and the school's chairman, angrily defended Uhrin.

"This is very annoying," said Veira, who would not talk about his role in the school's administration. He also refused to divulge the amount of his personal financial investment in the school.

"We have investigated Dr. Uhrin and found that he has not acted inappropriately at all. ... He is qualified to do what he is doing."

In the United States, medical school graduates must be licensed to practice medicine before they can call themselves physicians, according to the American Medical Association. In Pennsylvania, unlicensed graduates are not permitted to teach certain clinical subjects in a medical school, according to Leslie Amoros, a spokeswoman for the state medical board.

But because St. Theresa's is offshore, there is nothing the AMA, any state medical board or any law enforcement agency in the United States can do to stop Uhrin from presenting himself as a doctor or teaching any subject.

"Our reach does not go beyond U.S. shores," AMA spokesman Robert Mills said.

In September, St. Theresa's students and staff said Uhrin participates in clinical instruction that includes dissecting embalmed cadavers shipped to the island from the United States. A school tour revealed that bodies were left lying in black bags in an unsterile, unlocked, air-conditioned room, while empty coffin-size wooden crates with cardboard liners sat open on the front porch of the home used for anatomy classes.

That information shocked Dr. Patrick Martin, the health ministry's chief medical officer. Although it is the health ministry's role to regulate the transport and use of cadavers in the country, Martin said he was unaware St. Theresa's uses them until an October interview with the Tribune-Review.

For two months, Martin said he was trying to determine whether Uhrin obtained three necessary documents -- the donor's death certificate, transport certificate and embalming certificate -- before shipping human cadavers from the U.S. to St Kitts.

On Dec. 14, Martin said his department "has made the necessary investigations." He refused to discuss the outcome of the investigation and would not confirm whether anyone at St. Theresa's had the documents.

"The required action will follow," Martin said. "We will do what we have to do to assure compliance with the law of the country."

Members of the island's medical education community also were surprised to learn St. Theresa's curriculum includes human dissection.

"No medical school here would have a cadaver," insisted Dr. Cameron Wilkinson, medical director of Joseph N. France Hospital in St. Kitts and supervisor of clinical rotations for students from two other medical schools on the island. He said "it would be great," but explained the schools aren't equipped to work on them.

Some educators questioned the source of the cadavers, noting that bodies prepared by embalming methods for medical school use carry an overwhelming smell of formaldehyde -- something that was not present during the St. Theresa's tour. Bodies that are embalmed for viewing in funeral homes do not carry the smell.

"You can smell them a mile away. If you can't smell the formaldehyde, something is wrong," said Charles R. Modica, chancellor of St. Georges University in Grenada.

Many Caribbean schools rely on the Internet to attract students. Modica said some create false marketing campaigns that "belies their reality" of few buildings, faculty members and support services necessary for a quality program.

Ruby Padua, 24, an enthusiastic student from Los Angeles, said that although she is challenged by her courses at St. Theresa's, she was surprised to find so few students at the small school when she arrived.

"I chose the school after looking at its Web site, which said that everything was certified. It seemed like a good school and the president was excited to meet me," Padua said.

St. Theresa's Web site contains lists of curriculum and books, financial information and details about student life. In reviewing the content over several months, the Tribune-Review discovered the site has contained misleading information about its faculty.

In May, St. Theresa's Web site listed as adjunct faculty three professors from the University of Pittsburgh -- Dr. Mark P. Mooney, Dr. Nicholas Piesco and Dr. John B. Schumann. When contacted, each said he had never taught a single class at St. Theresa's.

Mooney called the information posted on the Web site "a little over-inflated" because the trio never did any work for the school.

"We signed a one-year contract to work as needed," Mooney said. "We're consultants for the school. I think the school never got off the ground, because we never heard back from them."

The names of Mooney, Piesco and Schumann have been replaced with the names of several other faculty members who could not be located for comment.

Although she would not talk specifically about St. Theresa's, Lake said that if the accreditation board finds that any school deliberately presented untrue or misleading information, its accreditation could be suspended or revoked.

"The matter could also be passed on to the legal authorities for the appropriate action to be taken if any allegations of fraud are substantiated," she said.

A number of administrators are identified on St. Theresa's Web site, including the president and chief executive officer, Jeffrey T. Irwin, 41, who used Uhrin's address on his Westmoreland County voter registration.

Irwin, a registered nurse licensed in Pennsylvania, said in a brief phone interview that he was teaching a medical ethics course in the fall semester in addition to handling administrative duties and fielding press inquiries. He would not discuss the school's administration, faculty, enrollment, curriculum and operations in St. Kitts or in Latrobe.

"Let me find out from our legal counsel. We need to find out what we can talk about with regard to the Pennsylvania Board of Medicine because it looks like we're running a school out of Pennsylvania and we're not. It's just a paper-processing center," Irwin said.

He did not return later calls.

Promotional materials also identify Dr. Mayer Eisenstein, a physician, attorney, author and radio personality based in Chicago, as St. Theresa's dean of admissions.

"It's more of an honorary title than anything else," said Eisenstein, who described himself as Veira's close friend. He added that he would not be "paid in money, but paid in friendship" for any work related to the school.

His son, attorney Jeremy B. Eisenstein, a Chicago-based immigration attorney, is identified as university counsel. He said if he would do any work for the school it would be done in the U.S. and would include "generalistic duties and immigration issues" on a fee-for-service basis.

Finally, the Web site indicates the small school "will serve as a home for nearly 1,000 students, faculty, residents and interns" and "through relationships with US pharmaceutical research laboratories ... assist in the ongoing research developing new medications to seek out treatments for world wide disease."

Dr. Bernd Wollschlaeger, chairman of the AMA International Graduate Medical Section, called those claims "outrageous."

"Places like St. Theresa's don't pass the smell test," he said.

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Students gamble on offshore education

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Each year, thousands of desperate Americans head to more than two dozen medical schools in developing Caribbean countries such as Belize, Aruba, Grenada, Dominica and St. Kitts.

Some lack the grades or test scores or money to get into U.S. schools, while others were denied admission for lack of space. A few want to jump-start careers, so they opt for accelerated programs offered offshore.

Although there are a few good schools, medical education experts say studying in the Caribbean is a gamble.

There are no uniform application procedures, admissions requirements or academic curriculum standards for the for-profit schools that often fail to prepare students for tough U.S. licensing examinations.

Caribbean medical schools vary in size and in the quality of their facilities, equipment and faculty. They offer curriculums that range from courses taught in traditional classroom settings to self-study programs and online lectures viewed as substandard by medical education experts.

In the worst cases, critics say, small schools start up with shoestring budgets and then close abruptly, stranding students midway through their studies.

Last year, the World Health Organization released a report that indicated an overall need for improvement in medical education in the Caribbean, citing a lack of quality assurance.

"Nobody really regulates Caribbean medical schools," WHO spokesman Daniel Epstein said.

Dr. Jordan J. Cohen, a professor at George Washington University and president emeritus of the American Association of Medical Colleges, said that while some schools are respectable, "there is a great degree of variability."

"It's very clear the fundamental motivation of these schools is to turn a profit. ... At best, they are highly variable; at worst, they are below any standards of medical education we'd accept in this country," Cohen said.

In the U.S., training for physicians includes four years of college, four years of medical school and a hospital residency program of up to seven years, depending upon their specialty, according to the American Medical Association.

Many Caribbean schools follow a European standard that allows students who complete one to two years of college to begin two years of medical courses in the basic sciences on the islands before moving to the U.S. for two years of clinical study, followed by residency programs. Some shortcut that process by accepting high school graduates into programs that combine college courses and medical study.

Mudit "Mike" Arora, 19, completed premed requirements in his freshman year at the University of Pittsburgh before transferring to an accelerated program at Windsor University School of Medicine, one of four medical schools on St. Kitts. The school is based in Pennsylvania, with offices in Lehigh County.

"I just figured if my end game is to become a doctor, I'd come here and get started early," Arora said. "It's not rushing; it's seizing an opportunity."

The Federation of State Medical Boards, which formed a committee in 2004 to examine the quality of overseas schools and create uniform guidelines, is among groups trying to upgrade Caribbean medical education.

Cohen said the AAMC has given the issue a "great deal of consideration," but found it is a complicated process riddled with jurisdictional questions because the schools are outside U.S. borders.

"It takes two to tango, and they're not here," he said.

Epstein said each nation's government regulates schools and develops accreditation standards.

"This is a problem, because what does the host country require?" said Dr. Bernd Wollschlaeger, chairman of the AMA's International Medical Graduate Governing Council.

Nevertheless, experts say it is unlikely that poorly trained physicians ever touch patients because tests weed them out.

"Foreign-trained medical school graduates must demonstrate clinical competency and pass an extremely difficult test. If they don't have the clinical expertise, they won't be able to pass it," said Robert Mills, an AMA spokesman.

Any medical graduate seeking licensure in the U.S. must take the three-step United States Medical Licensing Examination. International graduates also must have certification from the Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates.

Last year, The Chronicle of Higher Education reported that 57 percent of international medical graduates -- from schools of varying quality around the world -- earned passing grades on the USMLE tests in 2003, compared to 90 percent from U.S. schools.

All state licensing jurisdictions require foreign-trained graduates to complete at least one year of accredited U.S. or Canadian graduate medical education before licensure, according to the AMA. Fourteen states require two years; 29 others require three.

In Pennsylvania, international graduates must complete three years of graduate medical training in a residency program, as opposed to two for U.S.- or Canadian-trained graduates, according to Leslie Amoros, a spokeswoman for the Pennsylvania Medical Board.

St. Georges University in Grenada, which is held out in the medical community as the best in the Caribbean, opened 30 years ago and has graduated thousands of physicians who are practicing in the U.S.

Chancellor Charles R. Modica said he started St. Georges to meet the needs of Americans unable to get into U.S. schools. He said it has grown to include more than 50 buildings on a 420-acre campus where admissions standards and curriculum guidelines follow U.S. models and graduates routinely earn good residency placements.

Dr. James Reilly, director of residency programs at Allegheny General Hospital in Pittsburgh, has worked with 25 foreign graduates in the past eight years, including 16 from St. Georges. Seven of the 16 have served as chief residents.

"They do excel. We're confident with St. Georges," Reilly said.

Although no agency tracks enrollment, it appears increasing numbers of Americans are attending a growing number of Caribbean schools that are heavily dependent upon them to stay open, the Federation of State Medical Boards reported in 2004.

Modica worries that an increasing number of substandard schools run from small homes and storefronts -- without quality faculty and a solid curriculum -- will damage the reputation of good institutions.

"These schools totally lack the resources to stay open, and when they close, what happens to the students? What are they going to do with a transcript or a diploma from somewhere that doesn't exist anymore? Where are they going to be licensed?" he asked.

In April, an AMA report found that of the 794,893 physicians nationwide, 185,234 are international medical graduates. American citizens who train outside the United States are part of that group.

The 7,877 international medical graduates who are licensed physicians in Pennsylvania account for 20.4 percent of the state's physician work force, the AMA report found.

Unoma Allen, corporate communications manager for the St. Kitts Tourism Authority, said developing islands see schools as vital to their economy because students pay rent and utilities and patronize local businesses.

"If you look at the areas where universities are located, they are strategically located to give the area a boost," she said.

Americans who study in the Caribbean learn there is more to island living than blue water and sandy beaches. In St. Kitts, for example, violent crime against Americans is on an upswing, according to the U.S. Department of State.

Students there complain of homesickness, frequent electricity outages, contaminated drinking water, limited fresh food in grocery stores and prices that are triple the cost for goods in the U.S.

But to the students, it's worth the hardship.

"If I stayed in the United States, it takes a long time to be a doctor," said Kunal Sharma, 19, who attended the University of Maryland for two years before starting Windsor's accelerated program.

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