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Convicted Doctor Won't Work at UNM

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Dr. Christopher Nabors won't practice medicine in New Mexico anytime soon.

The Pennsylvania resident, who was convicted of vehicular homicide in a much-publicized drunken-driving accident in Louisiana a decade ago, withdrew this week from a position in the University of New Mexico's medical residency program.

"He didn't give a reason," said spokesman Sam Giammo, who said the withdrawal was effective Monday.

Nabors' attorney, Herbert Larson Jr. of New Orleans, said the physician's reason was simple: "He withdrew because he was told he wouldn't be hired."

UNM had conditionally accepted Nabors last spring for a spot in its Northern New Mexico residency program in Santa Fe. The Department of Health, though, ruled he had a disqualifying conviction under the caregivers criminal screening program.

He appealed, and the health department last month withdrew its earlier ruling, contending the law doesn't give the department jurisdiction over physicians.

The New Mexico Medical Board had earlier given Nabors a license to serve as a medical resident as long as he participated in a substance abuse monitoring program.

That left it up to UNM's School of Medicine to decide what to do. Medical School Dean Paul Roth had said he would run the matter through a decision-making committee for graduate medical education. At the same time, the story hit the news media.

Jamie Koch, president of the UNM Board of Regents, said he went to Roth for a briefing and made his own position clear that such a person shouldn't be admitted to UNM's program.

"I don't think it speaks good for us. We had other fine candidates," Koch said. "I believe doctors take a pledge on how they're supposed to operate, what they're supposed to do."

As soon as UNM learned about Nabors' felony conviction, it should have ruled him out, Koch said.

"It was made clear to Nabors' attorney that the selection committee (for graduate medical education) wasn't going to pass him," Koch continued. "And

if it went to the regents, he wouldn't have been accepted."

Larson was blunt in his assessment of UNM's position, calling it "craven capitulation" to adverse publicity. He pointed out that Nabors had told UNM about his background. "They knew what they were getting when they offered him the position," Larson said.

"Here you have probably one of the five most qualified maxillofacial surgeons in the U.S. who is willing to accept a position, jump through hoops, subject himself to any type of scrutiny to work in a place that's desperate for doctors. He's paid his debt to society five times over," Larson said.

That's not the view of the family of the victim in the accident, Michelle "Shelly" Haensel. Her father, William Haensel, has argued that Nabors should not be allowed to practice medicine at least until the full 15 years of his sentence has ended, if at all. Nabors was sentenced in 1996 but was released early for "good time" he earned in prison.

Shelly Haensel was in Nabors' car when it plunged into a bayou. Nabors escaped through an opening in the roof of his car, but his passenger did not. According to news stories at the time, some witnesses painted a picture of callousness, saying Nabors talked about what the accident would do to his insurance rates and referred to Shelly Haensel as a "bitch" when he told them he didn't know her name.

Dr. Mario Pacheco, who heads UNM's Northern New Mexico residency program (although he is not an employee of UNM), said he believes Nabors is a far different person today. "I certainly wish him the best," Pacheco said. "I continue to believe he's going to do some good things in life, in spite of his past."

Pacheco said he thought Nabors' past problems were due to alcoholism. "I don't think society in general is willing to be very forgiving in certain circumstances," he said.

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