Inefficiency, state bureaucracy frustrate inmates, health staff

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ANGOLA — Private doctors outfitted Leslie Sheridan with a "temporary" colostomy bag in June 1989 while a bullet wound to his colon healed.

Doctors should have reversed the procedure about eight weeks later, but Sheridan was arrested for vehicular homicide before he returned for the surgery.

Thirty months later, Sheridan still wears the bag as a patient in the Louisiana State Penitentiary hospital.

Sheridan, 35, expects to gain parole before he gets an appointment with a surgeon in the state's charity hospital system.

Either way, it may be too late. Angola medical director Dr. Kenneth Perego said the delay may have caused permanent damage to Sheridan's colon.

Sheridan has been in four Louisiana prisons since his arrest. He was less than 24 hours away from surgery in April 1991, but Allen Correctional Center officials decided to cancel the surgery and transfer him to Angola, he said.

"My doubts are that it can't be replaced," Sheridan said of the bag.

Robert McCuin, serving a life sentence for murder, began having his teeth extracted in 1988 after experiencing problems associated with a 22-year snuff habit. Angola's dentists pulled his last remaining tooth in June 1990.

A year later, he had impressions made for dentures, but said he later overheard a staff dentist say the state-contracted dental lab lost the impressions.

Eighteen months later and still waiting for false teeth, McCuin is served the same food as other prisoners — Angola has no special diet for dental patients.

"I either cut the meat into very small pieces, or I pack my mouth full and wait until I can swallow it," McCuin said. Using money socked away from a National Guard tour in Panama, he supplements his diet with easy-to-eat prison canteen food.

Angola's dental director, Dr. James Priddy, said prisoners usually wait three to six months to have impressions made and "then it takes six months to get the dentures."

But the dental lab that won the state contract through competitive bidding "quit functioning and has been holding them six months to a year," Priddy said, adding that the problem has happened before.

Angola hospital Administrator Ella L. Fletcher "finally got them back to moving," the dentist said. "On the 'street' it takes about a month to get dentures."

McCuin said his gums are shrinking and being flattened. He doubts his dentures — when they arrive — will fit. Priddy said
Frustration

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McCuin’s assessment is probably correct.

Albert Landry injured his knee playing football at Angola in 1978. Landry said he constantly complained about the injury for 12 years, but no one followed up on several doctors’ recommendations for reconstructive surgery.

“When you get hurt, you’ve got to keep going through the motions. It’s like nobody believes you,” he said.

Landry said he developed his own physical therapy regimen to get his duty status changed last year to allow him to play football again.

“It does sound strange,” Landry said of his decision to play despite the weak knee. “I took the responsibility. I decided I might as well enjoy myself.”

It may have been a smart move, however. Landry separated his shoulder during that game last year and later had surgery to repair the damage. While he was in Charity Hospital in New Orleans, an orthopedic surgeon examined his knee and again recommended reconstructive surgery, which was performed Nov. 18.

Angola inmate journalists Wilbert Rideau and Ron Wikberg interviewed Sheridan, McCuin, Landry and other fellow prisoners for an upcoming article in The Angolite, the prison’s news magazine.

While the article focuses on the U.S. Justice Department’s recent report on Angola’s shortcomings in providing health care, Rideau and Wikberg’s article also illustrates prisoners’ and prison administrators’ frustrations in dealing with the state’s overburdened, inefficient charity hospital system and the massive state bureaucracy.

“Given their limited resources, they do the best they can,” Rideau said of Angola’s medical personnel. “Often they go beyond the call of duty.”

“You keep on building prisons throughout the state, but you won’t fix the ones you already have,” Wikberg added. “There’s something crazy about that.”

The plan to boost nurses’ salaries by laying off clerical and maintenance workers at Angola “is a typical Louisiana way of solving problems,” Rideau said. “You create a deficiency in order to resolve a deficiency in another area of the system.”

Fletcher, a retired Army colonel, took over Angola’s understaffed and ill-equipped hospital earlier this year. “In my 30 years, I’ve never seen a military facility come anywhere near to approximating the needs of this hospital,” she said.

She said that if Angola’s hospital were an Army facility, “I’d get on a plane and go to higher headquarters to press my case to the commanding general — to either ask for funds to support the place or ask for a reduction in the mission.”

Fletcher showed a reporter one of two new-looking pump/controller units for administering intravenous medications. The company that won the state contract went out of business a year later, and now the equipment cannot be used.

Disposable cassettes used in the machine, one for each patient, are no longer available. Angola nurses regulate intravenous medications “the old-fashioned eyeball way,” Fletcher said.

A state-of-the-art cardiac monitoring unit sits unused in the emergency room. Fletcher said the nurses each need 40 hours of training to use the device, “but with only six nurses, how are you going to send them to get training?”

Any modern hospital room has oxygen piped into it. Angola’s oxygen is delivered where needed from an oxygen cylinder wheeled about on a dolly — a potentially dangerous arrangement.

The medical records room is crammed with prisoners’ files. Workers in the pharmacy, which fills about 600 prescriptions per day, have little room to maneuver between shelves stocked with drugs.

Angola has three staff dentists and a contracted oral surgeon, but only two dental assistants. Equipment from one dental station has been “robbed” to outfit the other four.

An inmate acts as a third dental assistant, handing one dentist his dental tools and assisting with suction.

“We don’t like it, but that’s the kind of thing that’s wrong with the place,” said Deputy Warden Richard Peabody.

Warden John Whitley said providing adequate medical care to Angola’s 3,200 inmates will be a problem for years to come.

“There are inmates here who were here before I came here in 1976. I’ve gone through my career, and they’re still here — they’re just older and sicker.

“If you’re going to lock them up for life — fine. But be ready to pay the cost, and part of that cost is good medical care.”