

DCs Lured to Foreign Medical School

DUBIOUS GOINGS-ON DOWN SANTO DOMINGO WAY

Steve Kelly, managing editor

An investigation into licensing of physicians in 1984 by the House Subcommittee on Health reported 10,000 people in the United States were suspected of having fraudulent medical degrees. Postal inspectors discovered a school in the Dominican Republic that had issued 165 medical degrees" to individuals who went on to practice medicine. In the U.S., 40 people in six states at one point were prosecuted." -- The Book of Lies: M. Hirsh Goldberg, 1990.

"Welcome to one of the most advanced and exciting Medical Education programs in the world," boldly proclaims the student flyer of the British West Indies Medical College (BWIMC).

Exciting? Yes! Imagine yourself jet-setting off to the Caribbean (Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic) once every three months for one week of study (including clinical rounds), and at the end of your seventh visit, you're eligible to enter the medical school of Uniremos (Universidad Eugenio Maria de Hostos), in Santo Domingo where in only three trimesters on campus full-time, your eligible for "world-wide licensure," according to the student prospectus.

Ah, marvelous, where else can a DC who aspires to enter medical school take a seven week preparatory course (what BWIMC refers to as "Phase 1"), and then enter Phase 2 and be "eligible" to enroll in Uniremos.

There are a few drawbacks: BWIMC's Phase 1 will lighten your checking account by \$25,000 dollars, not counting room, board, books, flights, etc.

But there is an even more serious consideration: What if you spend the bucks and time to complete BWIMC's Phase 1 and the Uniremos medical school won't accept you? Mr. Jose Ramon Garcia, an attorney's aid to BWIMC was asked if any BWIMC students had entered Phase 2, i.e., entered the Uniremos medical school after completing the BWIMC Phase 1 program. His reply: No one had!

With Uniremos or any other viable medical school not willing to accept BWIMC students, BWIMC could not keep its promise to their Phase 1 graduates to be eligible to enroll in a medical school.

The solution for BWIMC was devilishly simple and ingenious: open their own medical school to accommodate their own Phase 1 "graduates." Acceptance is guaranteed, as long as they can pay the tuition.

So, forget the "BWIMC/Uniremos" business: now say, repeat after me, "BWIMC and Universidad Federico Henriquez Y Carvajal" (UFHEC). Wow! Fortunately there is no school song.

Ok, now for the new rules: to participate in Phase 1 of BWIMC you're now required to make nine trips down to your home away instead of the former seven visits. The premed classes will still be held at the clinic owned by Dr. Luis Bentances (Centro Medico "Dr. Bentances." Oh, almost forgot, due to that two extra weeks of Phase 1 classes and clinical rounds, BWIMC has unfortunately had to raise the tuition from \$25,000 to \$40,000. Let see, that's approximately \$4,444.44 a week. Of course, that's not counting how much UFHEC tuition will be. Can you say, "No problema?"

"Welcome to one of the most advanced and exciting Medical Education programs in the world," proclaims the student flyer for the Universidad Federico Henriquez Y Carvajal. Where have we heard that before?

UFHEC, incorporated February 12, 1991, is, as you might expect, not your typical medical school. In a June 23, 1992 correspondence, a BWIMC student and class representative wrote his fellow students soliciting money "needed during the transition to the new college (UFHEC). Because of this unusual situation, an opportunity exists for you to invest. The financial return looks very good and you will help secure the future of our college as well as your own."

To invest, the student representative directs you to phone Paula Matlock, or Greg Caplinger. Ms. Matlock is listed on some BWIMC correspondence as "secretary," and later BWIMC correspondence as "Registrar -- N.A. Division." Now, if you want to invest in the new school, she'll arrange for that too. Perhaps "Secretary/ Registrar/Investment Counselor" would be a more appropriate title.

But who is Greg Caplinger? In a July 2, 1992 letter to fellow students, we learn that Gregory Caplinger (the man behind BWIMC) has bought UFHEC for a total purchase price of \$1,200,000; that "Greg ... has the additional financing available. He has taken a personal loan of \$800,000"; that "\$300,000 is needed by July 11, 1992. Another \$100,000 to \$200,000 is needed by the end of July." And finally: "After speaking with Greg last night, he made it (sic) aware that each investor may purchase stock or provide a loan to the school, at a fair interest rate."

The Evolution of BWIMC

To comprehend the BWIMC phenomenon, look no further than Gregory Caplinger, alias Gregory Frazer, sometime medical assistant who posed as an MD in Florida and North Carolina. He was arrested by the Florida State Bureau of Investigation in November of 1988 and charged with practicing medicine without a license. On October 10, 1989 Caplinger's lawyer entered a guilty plea to the charges. Caplinger was fined the maximum under the statute: \$500.

Among his activities in North Carolina was posing as an oncologist. According to reports filed by investigator Paul Myers of the prosecutor's office in Broward County, Florida, Caplinger examined one woman's skin condition of the hand, gave her a skin prick blood test, and diagnosed cancer with an imminent prognosis of death. The woman, in despair, gave up her job, and began treatment with Caplinger, with no improvement. The woman later discovered her skin condition was simply a reaction to the nail glue she used as a manicurist.

Caplinger left North Carolina to avoid probation and took his act to Florida. In the early part of 1989, according to reports filed by investigator Meyers, Caplinger was employed at the Florida Institute of Massage Therapy in Sunrise as an instructor. While there, Caplinger solicited investment money from students and employees for a school he was starting in Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic. One student of the massage institute was convinced by "Dr." Caplinger to invest \$15,000, entitling him to

10 percent of the West Indies College of Naturopathic Medicine and Surgery, a name Caplinger later modified to British West Indies Medical College. The student was promised reimbursement of his investment if he did not experience a profit within one year. The student never heard from Caplinger again.

In a document dated Aug. 1, 1989, another investor put up \$20,000 and got 10 percent of British West Indies Medical College and West Indies College of Naturopathic Medicine and Surgery. This certificate is signed by Dr. Juan Jorge, better known as Johnny, a selling of dollars on the black market and errand boy for Caplinger from the Dominican Republic who, reportedly, can neither read nor write. Juan Jorge assumed the title doctor at Caplinger's encouragement. Dr. Jorge's name would later crop up in correspondence as "administrator" for the Caribbean Oncology Center, another Caplinger scheme.

After being dismissed from the Florida Institute of Massage Therapy in June of 1989 for lack of trust, dishonesty with students and staff, and conflict of interest, as stated in company memos, he began offering medical services via flyers to doctors as Director of Atlantic Nutritional Consultants, providing evaluation of blood samples to screen for allergies, arthritis, viral infections, cancer, and multiple sclerosis.

In January of 1990, Caplinger gained employment as a medical assistant for Neuromedical Research Associates (NRA) in Tamarac, Florida. In June of that year, he asked an x-ray technologist, a lady friend of Caplinger's girl friend, if she would be the registrar for BWIMC. Her job would be to process applications for the college and would be paid \$500 for each applicant processed. After going down to Santo Domingo, the lady declined the position. Her experience in the medical field caused her to doubt that Caplinger was a doctor, and the explanations he gave her concerning the facilities and equipment did nothing to allay her suspicions.

While at NRA, Caplinger tried to recruit its research director to become involved with BWIMC and ended up offering him a position with BWIMC at \$70,000 a year. After visiting the Dominican Republic, the director realized Caplinger was misleading him and refused the job.

During his stay with the NRA, Caplinger, in two separate instances, convinced two of the clinic's patients with Alzheimer's disease that he was a doctor, and could treat their condition at his facility in the Dominican Republic. The patients each paid \$11,200 and flew to Santo Domingo. Most of the treatments were performed in the patient's hotel rooms. During the treatment of one of the Alzheimer's patients, the patients arm swelled to the size of an orange from an IV Caplinger had inserted. Only after the patient's wife exclaimed about the swelling did Caplinger remove the IV. The patients expressed the belief that they'd been swindled.

The victimization of these two elderly patients brought prompted investigation by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement and Broward State Attorneys General Office in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. Caplinger was charged on two counts of financial exploitation of the elderly (felony) ; two counts of grand theft (felony); and two counts of practicing medicine without a license (misdemeanor). Bond was set at \$120,000.

Caplinger's lawyer posted bail in Florida, but Caplinger jumped bail and beat a path back to the Dominican Republic. At one point, Caplinger was detained in Puerto Rico. Again bail was posted, and again he fled to the refuge of the Dominican Republic.

A Matter of Degrees

Dr. Caplinger's degrees are a very curious matter: According to an article published in Medical Economics, "No Medical Degree, No License? Come Practice Here?" the only license Mr. Caplinger holds is that of x-ray technician. One BWIMC student pointedly asked to see Mr. Caplinger's diploma: Mr. Caplinger never complied.

BWIMC legal aid Jose Garcia was asked and agreed, among other things, to provide "DC" with specifics of Mr. Caplinger's medical degrees. This request, not surprisingly, was never fulfilled.

Documents on file with the Florida Department of Law Enforcement show a diploma of "Doctor of Medicine" made out Gregory Caplinger from the Metropolitan Collegiate Institute of London, England, and another diploma from Sussex College of Technology in Sussex, England for Doctor of Science in biochemistry/immunology. Inquires made by Florida authorities to the London Metropolitan Police reveals that these institution are "not registered with the Department of Education and Science as establishments authorized for medical training, nor were these degrees recognized by the British Medical Council. Further, British medical administrators could not find Caplinger's name in its registry list of medical practitioners.

The letterhead of BWIMC has listed Gregory E. Caplinger as an "M.D. D.Sc, Chairman, Department of Immunology." Mr. Caplinger has also been listed on BWIMC correspondence as "President" of the board of trustees. In September of 91, Gregory Caplinger resigned as dean, and was replaced by Carlos Taveras, M.D. In a January 13, 1992 correspondence to the BWIMC student body, Mr. Caplinger is listed on BWIMC letterhead as "Administrator Chief Dept. of Oncology/Immunology." That same letter is signed by "Gregory E. Caplinger, M.D., President for BWIMC." Apparently Mr. Caplinger's duties and expertise vary, depending on the school's needs. Are you following this? On the new college's correspondence (UFHEC) he is listed as "Academic Advisor." The title "Investment Broker" would also be appropriate.

At least one thing is clear: Gregory Caplinger is president of BWIMC and major owner of UFHEC. This is very convenient positioning. You recruit students at \$40,000 a pop (the raise in tuition helps finance UFHEC) and then as "Academic Advisor" of UFHEC, you can "advise" the BWIMC students who finish Phase 1 to enter Phase 2 at UFHEC: not a difficult sell, as no bona fide medical school is going to recognize the BWIMC Phase 1 program.

Clearly, Mr. Caplinger is not your typical college dean, advisor, broker, and/or medical school owner. He has a gun-toating bodyguard following him about the premises, confirmed by two different students on two separate occasions. Perhaps that is the "exciting" the school flyer refers to.

One curious document in police files in Florida is a blank certificate of "Doctor of Medicine" from BWIMC signed by "Dean Robert James Bell, a man, who according to one of Caplinger's ex-wives, has been dead for four years. Also on hand is a blank certificate, untitled, by the British West Indies Board of Internal Medicine; a blank certificate for "Diplomate" from the Caribbean College of Oncology, signed by Gregory Caplinger, M.D., Ph.D., Secretary; and other diploma mill paraphernalia.

Despite the oddities of the BWIMC program, the school does attract students: mostly chiropractors. Two student representatives of BWIMC told "DC" their classes had 18 students, all chiropractors, with a few exceptions. Several DCs pursuing the BWIMC Phase 1 program expressed they were pleased they were getting credit for the course work taken in chiropractic college. Some of the DCs refer to

the program as "good continuing education," helping them be better chiropractors, to broaden their clinical experience. While some students have expressed no desire to go beyond Phase 1 of the program, others have said they aspire to "cross the bridge" (we're not talking about construction here; the bridge part means going from Phase 1 to Phase 2). Unfortunately for the students, the BWIMC bridge was never built, stranding their students on the cliff overlooking the chasm.

But as with any program, there are some positives and negatives:

(+) Combine work with pleasure: You can spend a week at the school in Santo Domingo and a week at the Club Med just up the road.

(-) As one student who was very enthusiastic about the program pointed out, "Almost all (professors) speak English to some extent." Dr. Daniel Glassman, a student who left the program in disgust and termed the college a sham, asked Professor Fernandez (also a colonel in the Dominican military) if he spoke English: "Little English," Colonel/Professor Fernandez replied. Dr. Glassman was forced to use his limited knowledge of Spanish to communicate with Dr. Fernandez. A Dr. Ceara translated Dr. Fernandez' lectures.

(+) Open book tests. One student was observed taking an exam while consulting a medical text throughout the examination. Another student complained about receiving grades in subjects never tested on. (Sounds like my kind of school.)

(-) During clinical rounds at the military hospital, several students asked to see the emergency room. The physician that accompanied them made the students a little uncomfortable, as he carried a gun tucked in his back belt. (Comes in handy if patients need to be put out of their misery.)

(+) While changing the school's name from BWIMC/Uniremos to BWIMC/UFHEC is confusing, it could be a benefit: For example, this flexibility might allow the school's administrators to opt for a more prestigious name change next time: How does Harvard Medical School-South grab you?

(-) Collared shirt with tie in class, and long laboratory jacket in clinics are de rigeur, despite the heat and humidity of the Dominican Republic.

(-) BWIMC induced American DCs to join the program by claiming in the college bulletin and via advertising that the college "owned and operated" the Stevens Clinic in Welch, West Virginia, U.S.A. to "add to one's vast medical experiences both on and off campus." According to attorney Larry Austin, retained by BWIMC in September 1991 to review the college's financial/legal/academic status, it was "emphatically not the case" that BWIMC owned the Stevens Clinic.

(-) One student described the clinical rounds at BWIMC as, "Watching people (patients) eating spaghetti and meatballs."

(-) The AMA's U.S. Medical Licensure Statistics and Current Licensure Requirements for 1992 has no listing for UFHEC.

We likely haven't heard the last word on BWIMC/UFHEC. We'll update you as the saga unfolds.

Stephen Kelly
Assistant Editor

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