

# **Rally for Dialysis Patients' Rights**

## **June 23, 2004**

### **Claudia Lennhoff – Welcome and Overview**

Want to thank everyone for coming out here today to show your support for our community members who are dialysis patients and caregivers as they fight for safe dialysis and their rights as patients.

Before we get started, I want to make sure that everyone who is here today has signed in, has signed a petition if you wish to, and has gotten a handout for today's rally.

I want to explain what we're going to do here today, so that everyone knows what to expect. First, we're going to hear from several speakers, including patients and caregivers and pastors in our community. After the speakers are finished, I will lead us off on a march to the Champaign Urbana Dialysis Center. We will end the march at the Dialysis Center and then a pre-selected delegation of patients and caregivers are going to go deliver petitions to the Dialysis Center's management, calling on the company to rescind its harmful policies. We will rally outside while they go deliver these petitions, and then they will come back and report to us, and then we will conclude our rally.

Now, I want to talk about why we have gathered here today. We are here today to call on the Champaign-Urbana Dialysis Center and its owner, the Renal Research Institute (RRI) to immediately rescind policies that are harmful to patients and that violate their rights.

I want to give you a very brief background on this situation, and in a moment you will hear directly from patients and caregivers about the specific policies and their demands. Also, I want to give you some good and important news that I just received this morning regarding some possible changes at this dialysis unit.

The Renal Research Institute (RRI) took over operations of the dialysis unit in 1998. RRI is a large national for-profit dialysis company that tells hospitals and patients that they are expert dialysis providers, and that they can provide more effective and efficient care because they are so large. Eventually, RRI bought the dialysis practice from Provena Covenant. Once RRI owned the practice, patients and caregivers began to experience many negative changes under RRI's ownership and management.

Most of the negative changes appear to be motivated by cost-cutting decisions – such as no longer providing patients with linens, and having fewer direct care staff. It's important to understand that these changes affect patients as well as the nurses and technicians who provide the direct care to the patients. Cost-cutting is bad for patients AND staff. In the spring of last year, the dialysis unit was relocated into this new building, but the same old problems continued.

For more than two years, patients' and caregivers' reports of serious problems were repeatedly ignored and dismissed, and patients and caregivers told us that they were at times threatened with losing services at this facility if they continued to speak out about the problems. These patients and caregivers followed all the proper avenues of trying to let the company and the management of this facility know about the problems.

Finally, they and CCHCC turned to the state and federal government, and after more than a year of submitting reports of serious problems, an unannounced inspection was conducted on August 5, 2003 by the IL Dept. of Public Health on behalf of Medicare.

The Dialysis Center and its parent company, the Renal Research Institute, were notified by Medicare that Medicare had found "deficiencies" that resulted in a "serious and immediate threat" to the health and safety of patients here. They stated that "We have determined that the deficiencies are so serious that they immediately jeopardize the health and safety of your patients." (8/22/03 letter from Bob Daly, CMS). They also stated that deficiencies "limit the capacity of your facility to render adequate care and ensure the health and safety of your patients."

In other words, the problems that patients and caregivers had been reporting WERE very serious! And if only this company had listened to their own patients, they would not have had the state and federal government come down on them, and more importantly, they would not have been endangering peoples' lives with unsafe water and the lack of important infection controls that are standard in every health care setting.

You would think that this would be a wake-up call and a lesson learned, but instead, once the company passed its reinspection after making some changes, they instituted harsher policies and relations with patients have continued to deteriorate.

And so, there was only one thing left for the patients and caregivers to do, and that was to organize! Patients and caregivers got together with supportive community members and advocates, and we formed the Dialysis Patients Task Force and we set out to collect signatures of support on the petitions we will deliver today that call for the changes that the patients and caregivers want.

I want to thank the more than 400 people from this community and around the country who have signed on to the petition and who are supporting us in this action today! And I want everyone to understand that the patients and caregivers who have spoken out, have done so at a great risk. They have had reason to fear retaliation and possible loss of service at this facility. But if they did not speak out, they stand to lose much more. In order to speak out safely and to have protection, they need all of our support. This may be a long struggle; it has already been a long struggle. But it is important for our community to stay vigilant and supportive. And this struggle is not just our own here in Champaign County. Problems like this are going on all over the nation thanks to these changes in our health care system at the hand of these large national for-profit companies and the lack of governmental protection and oversight. But as far as I

know, we are the first community in the nation to organize a grassroots campaign to fight for safe dialysis and patients rights! This is a historic struggle, and with your support, we are confident it is one that we can win!

Now, I want to tell you about some news that I received this morning, which brings hope that conditions will improve at this facility. I spoke to a person by the name of Pat Gunnerson, who is at the Dialysis Center right now. She is a regional vice-president of Fresenius Medical Services, and she is part of a new management oversight effort to work on this dialysis center. She assured me that the Renal Research Institute is very much concerned about the care that patients receive and that they do listen to patients' concerns, and as a result, new management oversight is being implemented as we speak. Ms. Gunnerson also informed me that they are in the process of finalizing major leadership changes as well at the RRI corporate level.

Ms. Gunnerson, as the leader of the management oversight that is taking place, assured me that she wants to work with patients and caregivers and with the Health Care Consumers! We would like to welcome the new management oversight to this facility, and we will work with Ms. Gunnerson to outline steps for a positive relationship that prioritizes safe dialysis and patients rights. And Ms. Gunnerson has agreed to meet our contingent who will be delivering the petitions to the Dialysis Center. She will be inside the Dialysis Center waiting to greet our contingent and to openly receive the petitions!

Now, I would like to introduce to you Rev. Mike Mulberry, pastor at Community United Church of Christ.