

December 18, 2015

To: Jack L. Fortner, President, UNM Board of Regents
Robert M. Doughty, Vice President, UNM Board of Regents
Ryan Berryman, UNM Board of Regents
Lt. Gen. Bradley Hosmer, UNM Board of Regents
Jamie Koch, UNM Board of Regents
Marron Lee, UNM Board of Regents
Suzanne Quillen, UNM Board of Regents

Ann Rhoades, UNM Health Sciences Center Board of Directors
John "Mel" Eaves, UNM Health Sciences Center Board of Directors
Debbie Johnson, UNM Health Sciences Center Board of Directors (ex officio)

Robert G. Frank, Ph.D., President, University of New Mexico
Paul B. Roth, M.D., UNM Chancellor for Health Sciences

From: Cheryl Willman, M.D.
Director and CEO, UNM Comprehensive Cancer Center

Dear UNM Regents, Directors, President Frank and Chancellor Roth:

Yesterday morning, Mrs. Dillie Martinez, a 74-year-old mother of three, grandmother of 7, and great-grandmother of two, was found unresponsive on her bathroom floor in Questa, New Mexico. Her daughter called the local ambulance, which rushed her to Holy Cross Hospital in Taos, where she was discovered to have suffered bilateral pulmonary emboli. Doctors in the Holy Cross emergency room began anticoagulants and she briefly became more responsive, but her condition was unstable.

Dillie Martinez is the mother of Rodney Martinez, Director of Finance and Administration at the UNM Comprehensive Cancer Center, who has given me the family's permission to talk about his mother's care. Upon hearing of her condition, Rodney rushed to Taos to be at his mother's side. Unfortunately, Mrs. Martinez's condition worsened throughout the day and the physicians at Holy Cross determined she needed the expert medical care and intervention that only UNM Hospital could provide.

They sought to transfer Mrs. Martinez to UNM Hospital, only to find out that our Emergency Department was on "Code Purple" status, with no availability. The UNMH ER was absolutely packed with patients waiting in the hallways, many of whom were critically ill. As usual, we had no beds available anywhere else in the hospital, where patients waiting in the ER for an in-patient bed could be transferred. The UNMH Medical and Surgical Intensive Care Units were similarly full, with many patients waiting for beds. At this time of the Christmas season – but at any time of the year – it is very difficult for those of us who are UNM physicians to have to tell referring physicians from across our state and the patients and families we serve: "There is no room at the inn."

In my UNM leadership role, I am often asked to help people navigate our system to access urgently needed medical care. I perform this service every single day for New Mexicans, or members of their family or friends, who are trying to access the expert cancer care we provide at the UNM Comprehensive Cancer Center or in other clinical services within the UNM Health System. I am always uncomfortable helping patients “jump the line” when we are full, but all of us who are UNM physician leaders constantly try to help New Mexicans gain access to our over-full system. Rodney Martinez called me last night to see if I could help his mother and the Holy Cross physicians. I immediately called Dr. Steve McLaughlin, Chair of our Department of Emergency Medicine, who was the attending physician in the ER.

Unfortunately, at 8:20 p.m., the UNMH ER had 52 patients waiting in the hallways to be roomed in the ER, many of whom were critically ill, like Dillie Martinez. The beds in the hospital and the intensive care units were similarly completely full. Dr. McLaughlin and the UNMH Medical ICU team offered to speak to the Taos ER physicians to see if they could help stabilize Dillie, or assist with her transfer to hospitals in Denver. Unfortunately, at 9:00 p.m., she died. So this Christmas, instead of convening at their beloved family home in Questa to make enchiladas, tamales, and posole, Dillie Martinez’s family will come together in grief for her funeral.

I simply cannot stand by any longer and remain silent. It would not be ethical for me as a physician who is committed to making New Mexico a better place, and, who cares deeply about the health and well-being of New Mexicans. We - the physicians and staff at the UNM Health Sciences Center and the people of New Mexico - desperately need for you to immediately facilitate approval of the UNM replacement hospital project. Our facility, built in 1954, is out of date and is far too small to meet the needs of New Mexicans. We desperately need a modern facility, so that the superb UNM physicians and staff that we have recruited from all over the nation will be able to provide the advanced, highly sophisticated medical care that only they can provide. We need to provide our physicians and nurses a modern facility to practice in so they will remain in New Mexico, knowing that the leadership of our institution and our state believes in them and supports their mission every day. Imagine how incredibly discouraging and disheartening it is for them to feel otherwise.

We must provide all New Mexicans with state of the art health care in the high quality facilities they deserve and provide a critical safety net for patients who urgently need our care, like Dillie Martinez. Dillie Martinez and her family are 5th generation New Mexicans. Thirteen years ago this January, Rodney Martinez’s father also required emergency medical services that only UNMH could provide. He too died, after waiting over 20 hours to be transferred to a bed in our UNMH Medical Intensive Care Unit. If we aren’t meeting our mission to serve New Mexicans like the Martinez family, then we have lost our way as an institution. What are our core values? How can we work together to assure we honor these values and meet New Mexico’s health care needs? Would Dillie Martinez have survived if she had been transferred to UNMH early in the day, as her physicians in Taos requested? We will never know. She never got the chance.

I have heard all of the arguments for why approval of the critical UNM replacement hospital project has stalled. None of them are justifiable. I do not accept that building a replacement

hospital for UNM harms private or community hospital systems. Or, that allowing UNM to build its replacement hospital would amount to “unfair” competition with community or private health systems and physicians. Those of us on the front lines of health care delivery in New Mexico know this argument is simply ridiculous. This issue is not about politics. When you are desperately ill, it doesn’t matter. The UNM replacement hospital is about assuring the life, safety, and well-being of New Mexicans. We have to speak out. We can and will write you and the members of our community every week, and I daresay every single day, telling you the stories and tragedies of New Mexicans like Dillie Martinez.

The advanced and highly sophisticated tertiary care that only UNM can provide to the most seriously ill New Mexicans – in emergency medicine and trauma, in cancer, in neurosurgery and stroke, in high-risk pregnancies, in children and neonates with life-threatening illnesses and in many other diseases – is available to New Mexicans only at UNM. That is our unique role as an academic health center and as New Mexico’s only source of tertiary, advanced care. This role *complements* the levels of care provided in New Mexico’s community-based hospital systems – it does not *compete* with them. They need us as much as we need them.

I, and all of the physicians and staff of the UNM Comprehensive Cancer Center, are so deeply grateful that in September 2014, the UNM Regents, the State Board of Finance, and Governor Martinez approved the finish-out of our cancer clinical facility’s shelled space. This large construction project will be completed in the fall of 2016 and is employing many New Mexico contractors and businesses. Had you not approved this project, I frankly don’t know what we would do. Our current facility is operating at greater than 130 percent of capacity, with radiation and chemotherapy treatments extending late into the evening so that we can serve the patients who need the level of care we provide. We work closely with cancer programs and community health systems across our state to assure that patients referred to us receive the very best cancer care. Last night we finished our cancer clinics and chemotherapy infusions at 9:30 p.m., in an ambulatory facility that was designed to operate from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Soon, we will be required to open our clinics seven days a week to accommodate this need.

You and our State leaders have supported our mission at the UNM Comprehensive Cancer Center and we have achieved tremendous success on behalf of the people we serve. Now, I respectfully request that you support the critical mission of the UNM Health Sciences Center by granting approval of our UNM replacement hospital project. There is no alternative. Your approval is an easy fix to meet one of New Mexico’s greatest health care challenges. We have tremendous need, we have sufficient funds, and we have the will to get this project done. Let’s get this critical project underway and move on so that we can work together to address other tremendous needs of our state, in education and economic development.

Respectfully,

Cheryl L. Willman, M.D.

The Maurice & Marguerite Liberman Distinguished Chair in Cancer Research
UNM Distinguished Professor of Pathology, UNM School of Medicine
Director & CEO, University of New Mexico Comprehensive Cancer Center