

A persistent foul odor Series: EDITORIAL

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Straight, Inc., is dead and buried in Florida, and well that it is. But the controversial drug-treatment program took a posthumous blow to the head recently when the Department of Health and Human Resources released a self-audit raising the possibility that Straight's operating license was renewed in 1989 over staff objections because of pressure from several unnamed state senators and Mel Sembler, the organization's founder and at the time a nominee to be a U.S. ambassador.

According to the audit, an HRS licensing team was prepared to recommend Straight's new operating permit be denied after inspectors discovered the abuse of some of the center's adolescent patients. The allegations claimed the patients were endangered when they were subjected to sleep deprivation, excessive force and the withholding of food and medication. Similar charges surfaced before in the myriad of complaints and lawsuits that had plagued the treatment center since its founding in St. Petersburg in the 1970s.

The audit also cited an instance in which one staff member questioned why the state allowed Straight to continue operating in the face of abuses that had prompted other states to shut the centers down. At that point, the audit says, HRS Assistant Secretary Ivor Groves threatened, "If you do anything other than what I tell you to do on this issue, I will fire you on the spot." Groves is quoted as saying later in the same meeting that "there was a lot of pressure to get this thing resolved." In the context of the meeting, a participant said, it was apparent the pressure was coming from Sembler.

Although the Straight center and the company's national headquarters in St. Petersburg have been closed since April, the new report paints an unsettling picture of the possible abuse of political power.

It could not have been lost on HRS officials in the '80s that Nancy Reagan, while still the first lady, called Straight her favorite drug treatment program, or that President and Mrs. Bush also had very public praise for the center. Nor did the kindnesses always flow downhill. Sembler, along with fellow developer and Straight board member Joseph Zappala, directed fund-raising efforts in Florida for Bush's 1988 presidential campaign. That same year, Sembler donated \$126,000 to the Republican National Committee, and Zappala donated \$127,000. Sembler subsequently was appointed by Bush to be ambassador to Australia; Zappala was appointed envoy to Spain.

While the HRS audit stops short of saying flatly that pressure by Sembler and others was directly responsible for the renewal of Straight's operating license, there is this intriguing finding: "During an Aug. 22, 1989, follow-up site visit to the St. Petersburg Straight facility, the HRS licensing team was prepared to recommend that the Straight license not be issued because of lack of compliance on issues that surfaced during an earlier site inspection. While at the facility, the team received a phone call informing them that no matter what they found, Straight would receive their license." The audit does not say from whom the call came.

This is regulation?

The biggest losers, as always, were the unfortunates caught in the middle: the youngsters and their families who turned to Straight for a very expensive chance to set their lives in order.

Why, when all of Straight's operations in Florida have been shut down - as well as most of its clinics around the country - would HRS bother with this audit now? What good could it possibly do?

Ellen Dadisman, HRS spokeswoman, said the investigation was allowed to run its course "to determine if we could have done anything better."

Yes, you could have.

And we sincerely hope you will.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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