Medical School Faculty Lawsuit to Prompt a Vigorous USC Defense

BY Alfred G. Kildow DECEMBER 2, 1996

Terming it frivolous and irresponsible, the university has said it will vigorously defend itself against a lawsuit filed by 17 faculty members in the School of Medicine.

“This small group of faculty claims the university has no right to require them to do their fair share in meeting the challenges facing the medical school -only the obligation to pay them,” said Provost Lloyd Armstrong Jr.

The suit accuses the university of breaching its contract with the faculty. Armstrong denied the charge, saying the university is trying to resolve basic questions regarding allocation of scarce resources in a medical school that is running a deficit.

“Most of our faculty understand the problems we share with other medical schools across the country and support our efforts to solve them. The medical school is receiving near-constant attention from all in our university leadership, including the board of trustees.

“We think it is irresponsible for this tiny fraction of our 1,075 medical faculty to expect us to bleed our College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, or our other professional schools, just to maintain the status quo in the medical school. In today’s economic climate, in which all medical schools are under tremendous financial pressure, the responsible thing to do is to manage your way out of the crisis.

“We believe we have the right to tie salaries to performance. Thus far, we have not taken away money from any of our faculty,” Armstrong said. “We are reorganizing our School of Medicine and, under our plan, we will reward faculty for productivity in research, medical practice and teaching. In doing so, we will provide appropriate incentives to those faculty who are working effectively to reposition the medical school in this new and turbulent environment.

“We won’t back down from this lawsuit,” Armstrong said, “because it isn’t morally or ethically right for us to bail out the medical school by taking funds away from undergraduate education. That’s shifting the financial burden to the backs of parents, and they’re carrying a big enough load as it is,” he said.

“Just as other organizations must downsize to remain competitive, so must we heed the pressure from managed health care, decreasing government research grants and a county service contract that has been slashed 25 percent in two years and may be cut again,” Armstrong said.

“USC is a research university, and research is expensive. Our university – and especially our medical school – cannot be supported solely by tuition and donations. To be viable over the long term, we must raise funds in many ways.

“We also have a responsibility to our students, faculty, alumni, donors and the public at large to control costs and operate as efficiently as possible,” Armstrong said.

Of the 1,075 faculty in the School of Medicine, 108 are in five basic sciences departments; the rest are clinical faculty who conduct clinical and basic research and see patients in the school’s clinics and

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hospitals. Teachers for the school’s 600 medical students and 200 biomedical science students are drawn from the entire faculty. About one-third are supported totally or partially under an arrangement with the county of Los Angeles to provide medical services to county residents, primarily the poor and those who lack health insurance.

Details of the restructuring plan have not been finalized; it has been worked on for the past year under the leadership of medical school dean Stephen J. Ryan. Department chairs and other faculty leaders have participated extensively, working to provide the basis of a new structure that will enable each of the school’s missions – teaching, research and clinical care – to be self-supporting.

The restructuring also focuses on making changes to the medical curriculum so that it better serves the needs of students, and improves the quality of teaching in the medical school.

“What is particularly disturbing about the tactic represented by this lawsuit is that it attempts to derail an orderly process to solve our problems responsibly,” Armstrong said.

One of the plaintiffs’ complaints is that the university changed their work year from 12 months to nine months. The university noted that nine months is the term for other USC faculty, including basic science faculty at the University Park Campus, and is standard practice across the nation.

Under the nine-month plan, faculty members can add summer salary through grants or other work, or take a summer holiday. When the university announced the nine-month work plan, it said that the portion of basic science faculty salaries paid by the university could be decreased by 25 percent. However, the university is subsidizing salaries at their former level until the final restructuring plan is adopted, expected for next spring.

“As a university, we are obliged to fulfill our vision of the future, not try to stuff ourselves into a mold from the past, repeating mistakes endlessly until we fail,” Armstrong said.