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How Dallas Owned the Ebola Problem

by BILL CHAMBLEE

A couple of the key lessons that have emerged in the ongoing fight against Ebola are the danger of hubris and the power of apology.

Early on, following the Ebola diagnosis of Thomas Eric Duncan at Texas Health Presbyterian Hospital Dallas, most people heard from spokespeople with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention who described Ebola as a “very wimpy virus” that the United States would stop “in its tracks.”

HEALTHCARE

By declaring Ebola’s weaknesses and extolling the superiority of our health care system, leaders aimed to quell public fear of a domestic outbreak. However, as information about mishandling of the Ebola virus trickled out, the public’s faith in our health care system had been shaken. Confidence in Western medical science turned out to be hubris. Presbyterian Dallas and its parent company, Texas Health Resources, became Ground



Zero for Ebola in the United States and potentially could hold the same position for the nation’s Ebola litigation.

Granted, Texas victims might have trouble filing a successful medical malpractice lawsuit given the state’s standard that requires plaintiffs to prove that caregivers willfully and wantonly injured a patient. However, like all employers, Presbyterian Dallas still

has an obligation to provide a safe workplace. The exposed employees may have workers’ compensation claims or, if the hospital is not a subscriber to workers’ comp, nonsubscriber claims are possible. But that’s looking at things as a lawyer.

Lawsuits or not, this was a public relations nightmare for any hospital. Until Duncan’s Ebola diagnosis, most

locals affectionately referred to Presbyterian Dallas by its “Presby” nickname. Nestled in a peaceful hollow, the facility perhaps was best known as the place where doctors successfully performed a heart stent procedure on President George W. Bush.

For nearly a month, parents picking up their children at the hospital’s Dealey Child Care Center passed a phalanx of news crews lining the western edge of property. These same parents and children have seen the many media reports of the frightening mistakes tied to the Texas Ebola outbreak, from the nurse who flew to Cleveland and back aboard a commercial airliner before testing positive, to the lab technician who handled Ebola-contaminated material before embarking on a Caribbean cruise until the ship was quarantined. The list of slip-ups has been long and frequent. Once a crown jewel of the Texas health care system, Presbyterian Dallas now is in danger of becoming the poster child for what’s wrong with Western Medicine.

However, amidst all the panic, hysteria and moral indignation, leaders at Presbyterian Dallas did something unexpected by personally apologizing to Duncan’s fiancée, Louise Troh, and taking responsibility for what happened.

“This official said the hospital was ‘deeply sorry’ for the way this tragedy played out,” Troh said in the statement released to the media. “I am grateful to the hospital for this personal call. I am grateful to God that this leader reached out and took responsibility for the hospital’s actions. Hearing this information will help me as I mourn Eric’s death.”

Suddenly, the discussion no longer focused on how Presbyterian Dallas wronged a West African carrier of Ebola and threatened the public health. The hospital’s apology shifted the conversation to the importance of caring for people such as Mr. Duncan who have contracted the Ebola virus. Most would agree that it was inevitable that Ebola would appear somewhere in our country, but the important question was how our health care providers and government officials would respond.

Far too often an insensitive word or thoughtless act results in a lawsuit against a doctor or health care group. If caregivers took more time to listen to their patients and express sympathy for their pain and loss while taking responsibility for true mistakes, the majority of medical malpractice cases never would be filed in the first place. Unfortunately, it’s a lesson that many health care providers have yet to learn.

Anyone who has ever sincerely expressed regret and apologized realizes that being sorry isn’t just saying a few words. It means the person apologizing has reflected on what has happened and realized he was wrong. It means he has no intention of committing the same sin again, and that he is committed to fixing the root of the problem. By becoming

the nation’s involuntary Ground Zero for Ebola, Presbyterian Dallas also became the proving ground for how a breach in public confidence should be handled.

Already, it appears that the hospital has taken steps toward healing. Staff members held a voluntary pep rally on Presbyterian Dallas’ front steps to show their support for all involved, including the battle

cry: “Presby Proud.” In a YouTube video, Presby nurse Nina Pham laughingly invited all of North Texas to visit her in Atlanta while she recovered from her Ebola exposure.

In reaching out to Troh and her family, Presbyterian Dallas might have headed off a series of ugly lawsuits. But what’s more important, the institution began its own healing process and put a human face on an insidious disease that can sicken the very people responsible for caring for others.

The quicker all parties realize we’re all on the same side in this crisis, the sooner we make Ebola a historic footnote in our nation’s health care history.

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