



The Pharmacist Activist

Volume 18, No. 12 • October 1, 2023

“The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and I am helped.” Psalm 28:7a

Editorial

The Courageous Kansas City CVS Pharmacists!

But Never Underestimate the Evil and Retaliation of CVS Executives!

I have not communicated directly with, nor do I know the identity of, the CVS pharmacists who participated in the “walkout” of numerous CVS stores in the Kansas City area on September 21 into September 22. However, their bold and courageous action has resulted in long-needed and widespread media attention to the understaffed and stressful working conditions at CVS stores that increase the risk of errors and harm for consumers, as well as moral injury and mental and physical health risks for pharmacists and their coworkers.

The American Pharmacists Association, Kansas Pharmacists Association, and California Pharmacists Association have issued strong statements of support for these pharmacists and concerns about the serious issues that prompted their action. However, it is the extensive coverage by the lay press that has been most responsible for greatly increasing the awareness and concerns of the public regarding the risks resulting from the staffing decisions and other metrics imposed by the management of CVS and certain other corporations that own pharmacies. Emily Le Coz, the senior investigative reporter with USA TODAY, has provided excellent, and the most comprehensive, coverage of the walkout of these pharmacists in her reports that include the following:

September 22: “CVS pharmacists stage walkout over working conditions, leaving pharmacy counters closed”

September 27: “CVS apologizes amid claims of unsafe workplace; pharmacists plan a second walkout today”

September 28: “CVS walkout ends; pharmacists cautiously

optimistic amid promises of more staff and relief”

Because of her awareness of a serious prescription error by a CVS store that resulted in harm to a young child, Emily Le Coz was looking into these risks when the walkout of the Kansas City CVS pharmacists occurred. She has very capably and extensively reported on the reasons for the walkout in a manner that has greatly increased the recognition by the public of the risks of errors and the working conditions in chain pharmacies.

There are several other noteworthy aspects of the walkout that have been identified by the media. Unlike most, if not all, other “job actions” by employees, this walkout had nothing to do with the salaries or benefits of the participating pharmacists. Their actions were motivated by their concerns about patient safety and their own intolerable working conditions. It has also been reported that shares of CVS fell 2% following news of the walkout (and have lost about a quarter of their value year-to-date). CVS has enough wealth to address and settle/resolve any challenge with which it is confronted, but its greatest fear is continued highly negative publicity that results in reduced value of its shares.

The CVS response

In response to the walkout and the need to close a number of CVS stores for varying periods of time, CVS immediately sent management officials to Kansas City, including its pharmacist who is its chief pharmacy officer and president of pharmacy and consumer wellness. Included among the requests of the pharmacists who staged the walkout was a request for apologies to employees and

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customers regarding the concerns that prompted the walkout. As reported in USA TODAY, the CVS official prepared a memo that stated, in part, “I want to apologize to our pharmacy teams that we haven’t addressed these concerns in the region more quickly.”

The follow-up

The Kansas City walkout has had a very strong public impact, and I highly commend the participating pharmacists. However, subsequent plans have had mixed results at best. Plans were announced that there would be another walkout, described by some as “nationwide” on September 27. Although some CVS pharmacists in Kansas City called out, none of those pharmacies had to close because CVS brought pharmacists from outside the area in to Kansas City to staff those stores, and I am not aware of any walkouts of CVS pharmacists in other parts of the country. As successful and as impactful as the first walkout had been, the one on September 27 failed, and I wonder whether the Kansas City pharmacists might have received some poor advice. For example, when the second walkout was not only scheduled but also publicly announced, why would anyone not anticipate that CVS would bring other pharmacists in to staff the stores and avoid the need for closing for even a short period of time?

CVS provides its perennial false excuses for the understaffing of its stores by claiming that there is a nationwide shortage of pharmacists. This is not the case, but rather any shortage of pharmacists they claim exists can be attributed to currently employed pharmacists wanting to resign as soon as they can identify another employment opportunity, and other pharmacists exploring employment anywhere but CVS because of what they know about the working conditions. For a more complete listing of disingenuous explanations from CVS and my identification of the realities, please see the August issue of *The Pharmacist Activist*.

CVS retaliation?

An early social media posting following the walkout noted, “I hope that there are no repercussions for all who participate.” Paula Christine Zorek responded, “It’s CVS and of course they will retaliate.” She went on to describe previous terminations of many CVS pharmacists because of policy and procedures violations, and agreements CVS has employees sign that grievances should be addressed via arbitration. Paula Zorek is not a pharmacist but her late husband Joe was a pharmacist who was employed by CVS for more than 40 years in highly profitable stores before he was terminated. Joe sued CVS and won. He and Paula became the “go-to” advocates for hun-

dreds of former and current CVS pharmacists and other employees who have been victims of management policies, discipline, harassment, and stress. She is more knowledgeable and insightful about all things CVS than anyone else I know.

CVS can be expected to retaliate against its Kansas City pharmacists who were involved in the walkout, but that won’t happen immediately or quickly while the situation is still the subject of news coverage. They will, however, identify policies that they will say the pharmacists violated and subsequently retaliate.

Moving forward

The action that the Kansas City pharmacists have taken has resulted in more news coverage and public recognition of the concerns regarding patient safety and horrible staffing and working conditions than the combination of all of the resolutions, surveys, and burnout/resilience programs of the pharmacy organizations. THANK YOU! Our profession is indebted to you.

However, if they have not done so already, these pharmacists should identify as soon as possible, another employment opportunity to which they can move, before CVS feels enough time has elapsed to escape negative publicity regarding disciplinary action and likely termination.

It is my understanding that additional walkouts have been discussed and specific dates proposed. For current CVS pharmacists who are considering a walkout or similar action, I strongly advise you NOT to do so unless:

1. continuing to work at CVS will place your mental and/or physical health in serious jeopardy, and/or
2. you have another employment opportunity that you can quickly accept.

Your concerns for your customers, colleagues, and yourself are well justified and understood, but you should not place yourself and your family at risk if your employment is terminated.

CVS is an evil company that only cares about profits and not the safety and wellbeing of its customers and employees. As a current, long-term CVS pharmacist recently said to me, “This company should be shut down.”

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