

'I Feel Offended That He Is A Doctor'

December 1, 2005

By Leslie Knopp

SEATTLE - You work. You get paid. That's how it works.

But a group of Puget Sound employees claim their boss broke their trust and did not pay them. A dozen of them came forward to talk with KOMO 4 News.

"He owes me \$1,600," said former receptionist Amy Strong.

Dr. Stan Abramski, a psychiatrist, says he's owed between \$15,000 and \$18,000.

"He owes me two paychecks which are for two weeks apiece," adds Elaine Ackerman, a former Business Manager.

Psychiatrist Dr. Amy Lazar says, "I'm owed approximately \$4,000."

Therapist Dale Roberts also says he had to take out a line of credit on his mortgage.

They all claim local, respected psychologist Doctor Phillip Hirsch owes them.

KOMO 4 News heard from 40 former employees -- in person, by phone, or by email -- who all make the same claims.

"He doesn't care that he's ruining your life, your credit, ruining the place you live and your sanity about your money," says Amy Strong.

Eight former employees won a court judgment against the doctor for \$180,000. They haven't seen a cent.

Dr. Stan Abramski says when he asked for his last pay, "He asked the police to escort me off." The former employees are therapists, receptionists, even psychiatrists.

All say once they were kicked out -- or quit -- Doctor Hirsch just hired somebody else.

Psychiatrist Joan Krakowiak worries about the patients.

"They're shuffled around from therapist to therapist -- particularly when there are complex issues -- it's appalling to me," she said.

"You know what I'd like to say to him, 'close down.' That's what I'd like to say," said former receptionist Tracy Larsen.

Doctor Hirsch did not return calls from KOMO 4 News. At his now-closed Greenlake office, he talked with us off-camera. His answer: "The clinic had a severe financial crisis. We're working to remedy it."

When asked what financial crisis, Dr. Hirsch replied, "That's nobody's business. That the issue is now in the courts."

But, the next week he closed that office and moved to a new one in Kenmore.

"I feel let down by the specific agencies, they're supposed to represent us; keep a standard of care," said Dr. Abramski.

"The board takes all complaints seriously," said Bob Nicoloff of the Washington Department of Health.

The State Department of Health has 13 complaints against Doctor Hirsch. When he briefly let his license expire, the department charged him with unprofessional conduct.

But, why didn't it shut him down? Nicoloff says the department must thoroughly investigate all claims before taking any action.

"I'm limited as to what I can tell you. I can tell you it does involve the allegation of business practices," said Nicoloff.

Elaine Fischer with the Washington Department of Labor and Industries said, "Realistically, there are cases where we're never able to recover the money."

L & I investigates paycheck complaints and the agency has 10 complaints against Hirsch. Why didn't the Department of Labor and Industries shut down the doctor? "L and I doesn't have the power to close his business for the wage issues, no," said Fischer.

L & I has just ended its investigation because Dr. Hirsch has declared bankruptcy. He's been evicted from his new office in Kenmore. It appears he has closed up shop. His former employees must now file a claim in bankruptcy court.

Dr. Abramski said, "I feel offended that he is a doctor and I am a doctor and this besmirches the profession of health caregivers. I feel it's terribly offensive."

L & I is attempting to toughen the rules about employers who do not pay employees. The agency is asking state lawmakers to give it the power to fine delinquent employers.