

Background: I'm writing this article because several former and current employees of DCMEO reached out after Barry Irmen returned to the office. They said they were shocked and confused that he would be reinstated given how much discord he had caused in their workplace.

Barry Irmen is a dedicated employee who carried out his duties professionally, courteously, and diligently. His performance was seminal to the establishment and success of the Dane County Medical Examiner's Office. He established and maintained excellent working relationships with staff, partner agencies, and provided steady support during difficult transitions.

They told me about the investigation that happened in 2020 that they say led nowhere, nothing has changed or been addressed. They said they lodged many complaints about the behavior and treatment they received from you and Barry Irmen, and that Dr. Tranchida watched it all happen.

Administration is open to comments from all staff, and encourages staff to bring forth their concerns as soon as they arise. Dr. Tranchida has always had an open door to the staff, and addressed concerns with honesty, an earnest desire for improvement, and without bias. If he had received complaints, he addressed them immediately.

They told me county officials have known about their complaints for years and did nothing.

I cannot comment on what other county officials knew, but the standard practice for the county is to investigate complaints when appropriate.

All in all, 12 current and former employees told me that they experienced a "toxic and hostile work environment," and they regularly endured bullying, screaming and insults from you and Barry Irmen.

I have never screamed, insulted or bullied any employee or witnessed the same from any other employee.

- Employees upset and confused about your announcement that Barry Irmen was returning to the office.

The retirement of Director of Operations Eskola left a vacuum in a high level management position in the office, with many administrative duties that required immediate attention by an experienced and trained individual. The Director of Operations position has a broad scope, and required many months of training in the transition from the previous Director of Operations. Barry Irmen was the most qualified person to step into this role on short notice, and agreed to come out of retirement to assist us in the immediate moment. Mr. Irmen has agreed to provide guidance and oversight of the office operations until a new Director of Operations is hired, and to train that individual. This was communicated to all staff in an email. The office is currently in the process of hiring a new Director of Operations, and the staff were informed of the position opening.

- Two former pathologists said they experienced suicidal thoughts because of the undue stress in the workplace created by their interactions with you.

I have no knowledge of this, and therefore can't comment.-

Dr. Rajkumar said you told her she was a "brown stripe on our flag," that she was reprimanded for her style of dress and "walking too aggressively," and that you looked over her shoulder while she made suggested edits, which were mostly stylistic changes and punctuation, and kept

her in the office until the early morning hours to do so. She said she once worked 35 days in a row and became so tired she scratched her car on the side of a dumpster in the work parking lot.

I have never referred to Dr. Rajkumar as a “brown stripe on our flag”, or made any similar comment to any employee. I have never told Dr. Rajkumar or any employee that they were “walking too aggressively”.

Dane County MEO has a dress code policy, which stipulates protective clothing for scene investigation and morgue work, as well as professional attire for the office. Employees are informed of this policy and provided a copy.

Peer review is a professional standard the DCMEO implements to ensure consistency in the wording of cause and manner of death determinations, consistency in detail of autopsy findings, and to meet quality assurance requirements. In instances when reports are urgently requested by the court, these cases are prioritized for completion, and pathologists are expected to meet these deadlines.

Pathologists are scheduled to work Monday through Friday, with equally distributed weekend coverage and assigned time for report completion. Staff are encouraged to communicate their concerns about the schedule, and to immediately notify administration if they feel they are unable to effectively perform their duties.

Rajkumar told me she invoked a safe word - banana - to de-escalate arguments with you. She said she left because she had suicidal thoughts and was diagnosed with "circumstantial anxiety and depression" because of working with you.

We encourage and expect an open dialogue conducted in a professional manner, and acknowledge that employees have varied learning styles and preferences. We proactively encourage employees to communicate those preferences. To her credit, Dr. Rajkumar was proactive in sharing her communication preferences.

Employee health information is protected information.

- Dr. Breslauer said that when they asked you why Rajkumar left, you told them she had a "psychotic break" and drove her car into the building.

Employee health information is protected information. I did not discuss Dr. Rajkumar's accident, nor use the words “psychotic break” in reference to any employee.

- Dr. Breslauer said you "maliciously" and frequently misgendered them throughout their employment. Once walking into a conference room where they were sitting with other women and greeting the entire group: "Hello, ladies."

The DCMEO staff strive to maintain an inclusive work environment. Staff self-corrected or were reminded if they erroneously misgendered Dr. Breslauer. Upon initial hire, we discussed Dr. Breslauer's pronoun preferences, asked their guidance on informing the staff of their preferences, and also asked for their patience and forgiveness as we included this in our lexicon. Although I have accidentally misgendered Dr. Breslauer, I never did so “maliciously”. I apologized whenever I caught the mistake or it was pointed out, and asked for them to continue to correct me if I made such a mistake.

- Breslauer said their medical opinions were regularly rejected, she was overworked, stressed and began having suicidal thoughts. She asked repeatedly for time off to see a counselor, but since there was no available coverage, she was not able to seek support. She left because of her negative interactions with you.]

Any staff member who expresses a desire for help is directed to the Employee Assistance Program. No pathologist has ever been denied sick leave or a vacation request. We work diligently with pathologists to address their workload, and have made changes to the call schedule, the autopsy service, and the number/type of cases assigned to one pathologist. Schedules are mutually agreed upon before implementation.

Medical opinions are never rejected, though pathologist's questions are always answered. Cases are peer reviewed and constructive criticism or direction may be provided; this is also described above.

Dr. Breslauer cited caseload, and other demands of the office as the major stressors to their work-life balance, and their decision to leave. We appreciated Dr. Breslauer's work so much, that we offered them a LTE (limited term position) to address these concerns, which they considered. Unfortunately, they decided this would not meet their financial obligations.

- Employees reported a current backlog of hundreds of cases and families waiting for death certificates.

The focus of case completion must always be to provide accurate and detailed diagnosis for the determination of cause and manner of death, as the implications to families and the court demand no lesser degree of care. If possible, death certificates are issued before reports are completed.

- Employees said DCMEO continues to do Brown County autopsies without a current IGA.

The final details of the Brown County IGA were dependent on the hiring of a pathologist to staff the Brown County building, the start date of said employee, as well as the opening of the new building, which were not solidified before the end of 2021. The IGA will be completed in the coming weeks as staffing, caseload and scheduling for the Brown Office is finalized. The Brown County Director of Administration is aware of these circumstances.

- Investigators and pathologists told me the reason they left DCMEO was because of the poor treatment they received from you and Barry Irmen. They say the workplace environment is the reason the paths keep leaving.

Pathologists who selected to leave the office have cited a myriad of reasons including the caseload, desire not to be on call or respond to scenes, family obligations, and life changes. We continue to have positive relations with several of the pathologists who left. One pathologist has returned this year as an LTE. Another pathologist had returned several times as an LTE before the COVID pandemic.

- Laurie Parisey, former Ocanto Chief DME, said you and Irmen once went to her home and yelled at her in her living room because you were upset she called a funeral home too soon.

Director Irmen and I met with Mrs. Parisey in her home at her request to discuss a breach of policy. The tone of the conversation was even, and neither I nor Director Irmen raised our voices or "yelled" at Mrs. Parisey. As I recall, Mrs. Parisey contested the direction, but acknowledged the mistake and accepted this was the expected protocol moving forward. The conversation ended amicably.

- Jeff Jansen, former interim ME for Brown, and Al Klimek said during the transition to working with Dane all of Brown, Door and Ocanto's DMEs left because they were unhappy with how you and Barry Irmen were treating them.

Hiring decisions of the Brown County staff at the time of the transition, specifically Mr. Jansen and Mr. Klimek, was determined by Brown County. The standards implemented were in accordance with guidelines by the NIJ and ABMDI for death scene investigation, and required rigorous practice to ensure quality forensic investigation. We worked diligently to provide the staff with the foundational knowledge and skills to achieve the new standards of investigation. It can be understood that this transition was difficult for the staff, but it was never disrespectful. Although some investigators left early in the transition, several investigators stayed for years afterward.

- Employees told me Sue Eskola was pressured to leave because of the hostile work environment.

Sue Eskola retired. She did not provide me with a reason. Before accepting the position of Chief Medical Examiner, I took the opportunity to discuss our future work relationships with Ms. Eskola, and sought her counsel. Although we acknowledged that we had different work styles, we also agreed that we complimented each other's styles in a way that would strengthen the office. Ms. Eskola told me that she thought I was the best candidate for the position of Chief Medical Examiner, and stated she would be disappointed if I did not accept. I felt the same about her as the Director of Operations. We anticipated a period of adjustment, but also gave each other the space to make decisions about our commitment to the office without judgement and in accordance with our individual needs. I was always willing to talk with Ms. Eskola about any of her concerns.

- Former investigator Alyssa Lytle said she has been yelled at by both you and Barry Irmen separately and together. She would excuse herself from the meeting and be followed out of the room while the yelling continued.

I have never yelled at Ms. Lytle, or heard this accusation. I have never seen Director Irmen yell at Ms. Lytle, nor heard of this accusation. I have never been in a meeting with Ms. Lytle during which she left, nor have I ever followed her. I have never seen Director Irmen in a meeting with Ms. Lytle during which she left, nor seen Mr. Irmen follow her or hear of this accusation.

- Given the generous compensation packages and thoughtful investment Dane County makes in recruiting paths, why do you think 5 paths have come and gone since 2013?

My answer to this is addressed above.

- Have you ever yelled/screamed at, insulted, made racial comments toward or misgendered pathologists? Other employees?

No. I have never yelled or screamed at, intentionally insulted, made racial comments toward or intentionally misgendered any staff.

---

From your previous email:

They described being "yelled" or "screamed" at by you or Barry Irmen, micromanaged, bullied, intimidated and insulted.

I believe this was repeated in the second email, and is addressed above.

I have also spoken with officials in other counties who told me they refused to engage with DCMEO because of negative experiences and treatment they received from you and Irmen.

I believe this was repeated in the second email, and is addressed above.

One former Ocanto DME said you went to her home and "yelled" at her in her living room.

I believe this was repeated in the second email, and is addressed above.

The former pathologists described needing a mediator

The administration of the DCMEO requested a mediator for advice and assistance with an employee who was disengaging from a productive discourse with the office as a whole. The lack of communication began to degrade their relationship with multiple staff members, and we sought expert advice. It was our goal to work with the employee to open effective communication to 1) identify and address their needs in the partnership, 2) identify disparities in communication styles, and 3) learn more effective communication methods and tools to continue to improve relations. The employee was asked if they were interested in this process, and they were, but were not interested in follow-up.

and having to invoke a safe word in order to de-escalate arguments

I believe this was repeated in the second email, and is addressed above.

One pathologist relayed a story where you told her she was a "brown stripe on our flag."

I believe this was repeated in the second email, and is addressed above.