SUPPLY PROBLEMS AT THE VA

While José began to equip his laboratory, he was given several talks by the Supply and Fiscal Department. These talks concerned the purchase of equipment and materials for research and for the clinical functioning of the Radioisotope Unit. A mimeographed list of suggested supplies and equipment was sent down from VACO. A fiscal disbursement in the name of the department was received. José was now officially ready to begin acquiring materials.

The Beckman Ph Meter

A Beckman Ph Meter was a necessity and, indeed, it was included in the list suggested. The model had a value of close to six hundred dollars.

At this time, the VA maintained a depot in Somerville, New Jersey, where materials (both supplies and equipment) were warehoused. The Supply Department locally could not purchase any material from local supply houses without first checking if the Depot already had this material. Furthermore, any piece of equipment with a value of over five hundred dollars required the initials of both the Chief of Staff and the Director of the hospital. José filled out the appropriate forms, obtained all the signatures, and the purchase order went out, not to the supply house, but to the Depot. Soon, notification arrived that a Ph meter of the requested particular type and price was available, and that it would be shipped to the hospital in a short time.

About three weeks later, a large wooden box containing the described Ph meter arrived. Upon receipt of the box, which was considered a transfer item within the VA, the Supply Officer signed and José initialed the accompanying papers. When the instrument was uncrated, however, it turned out to be a ten-year-old model. Because this lacked several essential electronic components, it could not function. José called in Dr. Matthew Conrad, a knowledgeable and talented electronic consultant. After examining the machine, Matthew stated that it would not be worth having the instrument fixed, and that the best thing José could do would be to dispose of it. The Supply Department, however, now refused to accept the machine for return. José decided, therefore, to mark the machine "Unnecessary", in surplus of his needs. Now the Supply Department agreed to return the instrument, marking it unsatisfactory and in need of repair. Under these conditions, they re-crated the machine and finally shipped it back to Somerville.

Three months passed. By this time, José found that he could not function without a Ph meter. Again, he went through the lengthy procedure of acquiring this machine. All the paper work was repeated, the signatures obtained, and again the order left the hospital. Sure enough, three weeks later a large wooden box arrived from Somerville, New Jersey. José and his technicians pried open the crate, and

there, before their very eyes, stood the old, dilapidated, useless Ph meter, the original instrument that they had previously returned. Supply Department had paid the five-hundred- dollar value for a second time! Again José called in Dr. Conrad, who again examined the machine and announced, "This is the same instrument as before! I know, because last time I made a mark on one of the circuits that needed change, and the mark is still there. Nothing has been changed!"

José inquired from Supply whether he could buy another machine, since he felt that returning this instrument once more would only repeat the cycle, and that he would undoubtedly get the same machine back still another time. Supply refused. Mr. Johnson, the Supply Officer, ruled that José's department was too small to justify having two machines. A couple of days later, the defective and useless Ph meter "accidently" fell from the second-floor window to the street below. The pieces were collected and turned over to the Supply Department, who now removed the listing of this piece of equipment from the record of apparatus property of the Radioisotope Department. Now, a new purchase order was initialed by José, with a lengthy letter explaining that his department needed a different type of machine which was not available in Somerville. In this way, an excellent Ph meter was finally obtained. (The total cost, including the two shipments from Somerville, came to about fifteen hundred dollars, of which one thousand was involved with the double shipments of the same broken Ph meter.)

Ordering Glassware

Setting up the laboratory, José found that a large number of test-tubes, beakers, and other glassware would be required, and the total expenditure involved would come to over two thousand dollars. The Supply Department decided that this order should go out on a bid, and this was sent out to ten different suppliers of laboratory glassware. After a month, replies had come in from ten reliable and reputable supply houses, each for a total of approximately two thousand dollars. (The variations among them were insignificant.) However, an additional bid also arrived from an unknown company. This was for fifteen hundred dollars. Naturally, Supply awarded the bid to this unknown company.

After three months and still no delivery of any glassware, José demanded the materials from Supply. Supply investigated. It turned out that there was a gentleman who rented a desk in an office complex, and that he was the one who had answered the bid. This gentleman apparently believed that he could purchase all the glassware from the established suppliers at a discount. These suppliers, upon receiving the identical order from the VA's bid, refused to conduct any business with this fly-by-night dealer, who had already left his desk at the office establishment and could not be found. José was now required to resubmit his request but, by the time that the paper-work left the hospital (some eight months

later) the prices had gone up. Supply also decided to purchase the different materials in smaller amounts, which increased the price still another twenty to thirty percent.

Sulfuric Acid Purchase

The laboratory consumed large quantities of sulfuric acid, and Supply demanded a large purchase order, and a bid for this material that represented about three hundred dollars. (The acid came in small pint bottles with glass-to-glass stoppers and plaster of Paris capping.) The bid went out and, again, an unknown person won it with a price of one percent less than that of the well-established dependable supply houses. José could not convince Supply to give the order to any of the well-established supply houses, or to break it down into smaller fifty-dollar orders so as to avoid going to a bid.

The order was sent out, and a large box eventually arrived months later. Upon opening the box, José observed that every container had a corroded plastic stopper, and that the solutions were full of pieces of the plastic material from the stoppers. None of the material could be used. What had occurred, it turned out upon investigation, was that the company winning the bid had purchased a large container of the strong acid from a dealer and then bought lots of small bottles with plastic caps. Then, they had poured the acid into these small bottles, all of which they stoppered with the plastic caps in place of the ground-glass stoppers costing twenty times more. All of the material had to be carefully handled and disposed of. Concentrated sulfuric acid is only packaged in ground-glass containers. The Supply Department claimed that it was not their fault. After all, they insisted, the bid had not specifically stated "ground-glass stoppers."

Calendars

José felt that each employee in the department, as well as all of the visiting professors, interns, and residents there, should each have a calendar notebook so that expiration dates of materials and deadlines, assignments and workloads were known to everyone. He found, in a commercial office supply house, a book which satisfied these needs. The book cost about four dollars per copy.

José put in a request to Supply for twenty of these books, and suggested several well-established office-supply houses for the purchase. He put in the order in September, knowing full well that it would take months to process. In December the books arrived, all of them with calendars two years old. A telephone call to this small vendor elicited the reply, "The purchase order did not specify a date for the calendars!" Since the vendor still had unsold copies from previous years, these were the ones that he decided to ship. Since the total cost was a small amount, the investigator from Supply did not believe that anything could be done and, sure

enough, the purchase order had not specified the year.

The Liquid-Scintillation Machine

A large liquid-scintillation machine for measuring beta radiation was approved for purchase. This piece of equipment, representing over fifteen thousand dollars, arrived to the hospital with two enormous holes in the body of the instrument. Upon examining the heavy cardboard container in which it had been packed, José noticed that this, too, also contained two large holes, one twelve inches from the other, and each hole about two inches in diameter. Supply had accepted and signed the paper-work, and then brought the instrument upstairs to José's laboratory.

José spoke to the Chief and suggested that the lift-fork must have gone through the machine and that, therefore, no payment should be given to the company. Just whose forklift had gone through was not clear, since the machine had come from Chicago and had gone through three different shipping outfits on the way to the hospital, in addition to the hospital's handling as well. José was required to sign dozens and dozens of affidavits and papers and, eventually, the machine was returned to the company and a new purchase order made up for another identical instrument. Approximately six months later, the newly ordered instrument arrived and was then used for many years.

Much later, when José was beginning to prepare for retirement, the inventory list of his equipment contained two liquid-scintillation machines. He explained until he was blue in the face that he had only one, and that the other one had been returned because it had been received damaged. Apparently, all of the paper work had been wrong, and the only way to clear the problem up was to declare that one of the machines had been accidentally destroyed and disposed of.

Pinching Pennies

At regular intervals, Supply would send inspectors to double-check the inventories for every piece of material that had a value of over fifty dollars. José wrote several letters explaining that fifty dollars was a very small amount in these circumstances, and that this should be increased to five hundred or one thousand dollars for inventory purposes. He pointed out that it made more sense for electronic equipment to be judged by physicians or scientists for its value, rather than by non-technically trained personnel. For this effort, José was verbally reprimanded. He was accused for trying to obtain excessive power for the technicians and laboratory people.

The 131-I Patient

José was contacted by the Review Board, which had been established by

Drs. Chamberlain, Raventos, Eberhardt, and Boyle. They informed him that a patient who had been tested and scanned for thyroid carcinoma and diffused metastasis of functioning thyroid metastatic tissue in the lungs was a candidate for a recommended treatment. This would consist of a massive dose of 131-I and TSH, and the Board felt that this might prolong the life of this patient, who was clearly dying pf thyroid carcinoma.

In 1954, to obtain a very large shipment of 131-I required direct contact with Oak Ridge and an enormous amount of paperwork, as well as considerable expense (eight hundred dollars). After many telephone calls and arrangements with Supply, José finally received a shipment of the material in a very heavy lead cask. The patient was called in and explained that he would have to drink this solution and be kept in a separate room, unable to receive visitors for two days. He was told that this would prolong his life by burning the thyroid metastasis. The patient, a sixty-year-old man, requested time to think this over. Twenty-four hours later, José brought him back and explained that he must make the decision soon, because the isotope was decaying. The patient responded that he had heard and read that the isotope would render him impotent. Therefore, he had decided to refuse treatment. José got one of the staff psychologists (Dr. Leon Cohen) to talk to the patient, but to no avail. Repeated talks by José, psychiatrists, and other staff failed to change the patient's mind. He was informed that surgery could not be performed on him because the tumor was in his lungs, neck, and mouth, and that his life expectancy was not very long. With the 131-I, he was told, he could continue to live for many more months, and might actually get cured. The patient continued to refuse. He died about a month later.

Years after this, José ran into two parallel situations involving patients who both happened to be physicians and very well-educated men. Both were men with whom he had collaborated in his work and his research, and both, over the years, had become personal friends. Each man had prostate carcinoma which, by the time José became aware of their situation, was far advanced and had invaded their bones. In the 1960's, orchidectomies were mandated for this condition. Each man had refused the surgery, and each one died in his home, one in France, the other in Puerto Rico. Prior to their deaths, both wives had called José. They pleaded with him to talk to their husbands, begging him to try to convince them to undergo the surgery which could have prolonged their lives. José willingly complied, using logic, citing scientific evidence, and even resorting to sentiment and emotion. He remained unsuccessful in both cases.

The Root Canal Samples

José was collecting, from different endodontists, root canal samples for his research. He would supply the endodontists with containers that already contained

special solutions for these materials, as well as with the needed clinical information on each root canal so that they could be classified. For the extra effort of documentation, and the supplying and examining of the endodontic material, José felt that the endodontists should be financially recompensed. The paper work that the endodontists would have to do, however, in order to claim such recompense proved so voluminous and so complex that the endodontists themselves requested to José that they do everything involving their part in the study themselves, completely without financial compensation. This would enormously simplify their own work-lives, they insisted, and this was how matters eventually proceeded.