

6 Montana nurses put on probation for dispensing morphine

■ **Hospice:** Drugs stored in desk were used only to fill doctors' orders when pharmacies were closed, nurses say.

HELENA, Mont. (Reuters) — The Montana Board of Nursing has ordered three to five years probation for six nurses who violated state medical rules by dispensing the painkiller morphine for use on dying cancer patients.

The ruling Thursday followed weeks of public debate over the actions of nurses at St. Peter's Hospital hospice who admitted storing morphine suppositories donated by relatives in the unlocked drawer of their supervisor, Mary Mouat.

They said the drugs were used only to fill doctors' prescriptions when pharmacies were closed and that the problem was solved before it came to the board's attention.

Montana law required that drugs be dispensed only by pharmacists, not doctors and nurses.

The case — viewed by many as a matter of nurses showing compassion toward dying patients — caused such an uproar in this community of 25,000 that 1,400 residents signed a newspaper advertisement supporting the nurses.

Steven Shapiro, the state lawyer who prosecuted the case, as vilified in letters to the editor, many of them written by doctors.

Citizens wore yellow buttons that read "Free the Hospice Six." The slogan was even painted on pickup trucks.

The penalties were about twice as long as those the board normally imposes on nurses who divert drugs for their personal use.

Shapiro has recommended that the licenses of five of the nurses be suspended for five or six months and that Mouat's license be revoked until she proved she was "rehabilitated."

John Bobinski, who presided over a three-day inquiry in April, had recommended that the nurses only be reprimanded. He called Shapiro callous and said his calls for suspended licenses "unconscionable."