

Pair Sue over Son with Brain Damage

Couple fault hospital staff for insulin overdose, aftercare

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Of the Morning Call
MAY 1, 1993

THE
MORNING
CALL

A former Allentown couple have claimed in a federal suit that their infant son was

mistakenly given a massive dose of insulin in his intravenous bag at Allentown Hospital in May 1991, causing him severe permanent brain damage. They also contend doctors and other hospital officials, who knew about the dose within weeks, did not tell them about it for seven months.

Further, parents James McAlister and Linda Sibiga of Kernersville, N.C., claim the hospital tried to blame them. They say the hospital reported to Lehigh County District Attorney Robert Steinberg that the parents had deliberately put the insulin in the bag. The parents say they didn't add insulin to the bag and had never administered insulin to their son. They say the hospital officials also spread rumors that the damage occurred because they were abusing their son.

They contend it will cost them \$32,714,251 for medical expenses, nursing and custodial care over his lifetime and loss of earning capacity." *This is one of 15 counts.* The suit was filed yesterday in Philadelphia, according to the parents' attorney, Thomas R. Kline. It names as defendants eight individuals as well as Allentown Hospital-Lehigh Valley Hospital Center, Healtheast Inc. and Lehigh Valley Hospital.

The individual defendants include Drs. Anderw B. Walker of Pensacola, Fla.; Edward Denny of Marshfield, Wis.; and John Van Brackle, Richard Townsend and William Frailey of Lehigh Valley Hospital.

Also named are risk management director Georgene Saliba, pharmacist Gregg Snyder and nurse Cynthia Max. This is the second suit involving the child. One filed in 1991 in Lehigh County Court is pending.

No one at the offices of the Philadelphia law firm that filed the federal suit was available to explain the differences between this one and the county case. This complaint cites depositions taken in the county case, including testimony of nurse Joan Livesay claiming she overheard Walker say, "We have our own Claus von Bulow case."

Livesay interpreted Walker's words to mean the child's mother or father attempted to murder him in the manner Von Bulow was accused of attempting to murder his wife. But Livesay said from her own observations of Sibiga with the child, "she appeared to be a caring and loving mother."

The suit also says Walker secretly took the intravenous bag from the hazardous waste trash and kept it in the trunk of his car for several days before returning it to the hospital. The parents say this hindered proper testing of what the bag contained. Walker was responsible "for intentional spoilage of evidence," they say. The boy, Johnathan McAlister, was born Jan. 27, 1991, two months premature, at Allentown Hospital. He was a patient in the neo-natal unit for two months.

During that time, he developed severe intestinal problems. He came under the care of Walker, who removed part of the small bowel and created an opening for wastes in the child's abdomen.

He was discharged when he was 2 months old. He was neurologically intact, the suit says. He was readmitted April 29 to have Walker close the opening. The suit says the insulin was wrongly administered in the intravenous bag on May 4. It claims the pharmacy technician, who prepared the bag that would deliver nutrients intravenously, had no formal educational training and had never administered the bag to a pediatric or neo-natal patient. The suit says that caused the boy to suffer respiratory arrest about 4 p.m. that day. He was resuscitated, though he had subsequent episodes of intermittent respiratory arrest. It says the infant wasn't tested for urine sugars for three days during this period - though procedure called for such monitoring every four hours.

It says for a period of 16 hours that day, no nurse recorded the child's listlessness and lethargy. Two days later, the infant developed seizures and evidence of neurologic damage.

The parents say they were told then that the boy was injured during the May 4 episode but not the extent or cause.