

Ex-employee sues hospital, caregivers

By Sacha Pfeiffer, Globe Correspondent, 08/06/99

After his young wife died shortly after childbirth at Newton-Wellesley Hospital two years ago, hospital therapist Mark Petrie says he was offered a deal: a lifetime, no-show job and full health benefits for him and his two children if he agreed not to talk publicly about his wife's death or question the hospital's delay in calling the medical examiner.

Petrie, who was making \$35,000 a year as a pulmonary therapist at Newton-Wellesley and had recently bought a house in New Hampshire, accepted, keeping silent while Newton-Wellesley kept him on the payroll.

But the job ended a year later and now Petrie has filed two lawsuits, one a wrongful death suit against four nurses and two doctors who treated his 27-year-old wife, the second a breach of contract suit against the hospital for allegedly renegeing on a job guarantee. "They were bombarded with all this press coverage, so they tried to cover this up," Petrie said in an interview yesterday, referring to the back-to-back maternity deaths at the hospital where his wife of six years died. "Why didn't they just say, 'We made a mistake,' and move on?"

Amy Staley, the hospital's director of public affairs and marketing, denied all charges in the breach of contract suit, but declined to comment further, citing pending litigation. Staley said hospital officials had not yet seen the wrongful death suit and could not comment on it.

Petrie says that shortly after his wife Charlotte's death in May 1997 he was called to Newton-Wellesley by hospital officials, who said they wanted to "take care of you and your family." At the time of the meeting, Petrie - then a father of a 2-year-old and a newborn - had not yet returned to the job he had held for three years.

Petrie said his first concern was finding out the truth about his wife's death - which received extensive media coverage as the second maternity death at Newton-Wellesley in two days - including the hospital's delay in notifying the state medical examiner.

Petrie says that when he told hospital officials that he was unsure if he could return to work due to the emotional toll of his wife's death and his responsibilities as a widowed father, they offered to place him on "permanent special status," enabling him to receive lifetime pay whether he showed up for work or not.

But the deal came at a price, Petrie says. In return, he would agree not to speak with the news media or the state medical examiner until the hospital completed its investigation into his wife's death. He also agreed to sign a letter indicating that he planned to file an insurance claim with the hospital's carrier in connection with his wife's death.

Petrie, who says that hospital officials indicated that the investigation would be done soon, agreed to the deal, which he says was approved by John P. Bihldorff, Newton-Wellesley's president and chief executive.

For one year, Petrie says, the hospital honored the deal, which was not put in writing. He never returned to work but continued to get paychecks.

But after a year, with the news media gone, the investigation still unresolved and the hospital's insurer apparently unwilling to reach a settlement with Petrie based solely on the "claim letter" he had signed, Petrie says he was fired on May 1, 1998.

Two weeks later, the paychecks and benefits stopped, Petrie says.

Reached yesterday at his home in Queensbury, N.Y., where he lives with his parents and children, Petrie, now 29, said he believes hospital staff "overmorphined" his wife, resulting in her death. In an effort to avoid public embarrassment over the death, hospital officials attempted to cover it up, he alleges.

Petrie has filed a wrongful death suit in Suffolk Superior Court and a breach of contract suit in US District Court. One of Petrie's two attorneys, Frederic Halstrom, declined to comment yesterday.

According to hospital officials at the time, Charlotte Petrie suffered cardiopulmonary arrest hours after giving birth to a healthy daughter.

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