

Testimony begins in wrongful death suit Widower blames hospital caregivers

By Jonathan Saltzman, Globe Staff | May 4, 2006

Nine years ago this month, after undergoing a caesarean section at Newton-Wellesley Hospital, 27-year-old Charlotte Petrie delivered her second child, a girl named Alexandria with red hair like her maternal grandfather's. At 4 a.m., her husband, Mark, lay on a cot next to his exhausted wife in her room and fell asleep.

What happened over the next 90 minutes is the focus of a bitter civil lawsuit that went to trial this week in Suffolk Superior Court.

Mark Petrie said in an interview that shortly after 5 a.m. he was awakened by a nurse hovering over his wife and frantically yelling that her blood pressure was plunging.

Charlotte Petrie had stopped breathing and had no pulse.

Doctors started Petrie's heart again with a defibrillator, but she had suffered irreversible brain damage. Three days later, her husband agreed to remove his high school sweetheart from life support.

Mark Petrie, who worked at Newton-Wellesley as a pulmonary therapist at the time, contends that two doctors negligently gave his wife an overdose of morphine, causing her heart to stop, and failed to give her an antidote until it was too late.

As testimony began yesterday, an expert witness called by Petrie offered the same opinion.

"This was a lady who was healthy," said James T. O'Donnell, an Illinois pharmacologist who teaches at Rush Medical College in Chicago. Several other narcotics given to Petrie enhanced the effects of the morphine, he said. "In my opinion as a pharmacologist, the drugs were the cause," said O'Donnell, the only witness yesterday.

But lawyers for the two defendants, Dr. Susan Arnold-Aldea, an obstetrician-gynecologist, and Dr. Paul R. Satwicz, an anesthesiologist, said O'Donnell was not a doctor and had only passing knowledge of the case.

The lawyers contend that Petrie received proper care and died as a result of an undiagnosed heart arrhythmia. They characterized O'Donnell as a professional witness who acknowledged that he has testified hundreds of times in medical malpractice suits, usually for plaintiffs. They also said he had misrepresented himself in the early 1980s as having a doctorate in pharmacology.

After the testimony, Petrie said he has no doubt doctors gave his wife an overdose.

"They're all arrogant, saying, 'We've prescribed these drugs hundreds of time before,' " he said. "Well, it's not an assembly line. You killed my wife."

The trial, which is expected to run about three weeks, shines a spotlight on Newton-Wellesley at a time when the hospital was rocked by concerns about the quality of its care as well as major image and financial problems.

Charlotte Petrie died the same week as Tamara Barry, a 34-year-old woman who had delivered a stillborn baby at Newton-Wellesley. A hospital official said at the time that Barry had contracted a strep infection before she arrived at the hospital. Her family sued the hospital staff in Middlesex Superior Court and settled out of court for an undisclosed sum.

The maternal deaths triggered a high-profile investigation by the state Department of Public Health that found that Newton-Wellesley had failed to meet federal standards in staffing and quality assurance, although investigators credited the hospital for taking prompt steps to correct that.

Meanwhile, Petrie filed two lawsuits.

One was the wrongful death suit in Suffolk against the two doctors. That complaint originally also named four nurses as defendants, but Petrie reached a \$3 million out-of-court settlement with them in October 2004, according to court documents.

The other suit was a breach-of-contract complaint in federal court against the hospital for allegedly reneging on a job guarantee. In that suit, he said the hospital offered him a lifetime, no-show job and full health benefits for him and his two children if he agreed not to talk about his wife's death. One year later, he said, the job ended. That suit was settled under terms that remain confidential.

As the testimony began yesterday, Petrie sat in the courtroom between his son, Cameron, 11, and Alexandria, who will turn 9 on Mother's Day. On the other side of the room sat Satwicz, who continues to work at NewtonWellesley, and Arnold-Aldea, who has moved to Seattle and is not practicing medicine.

O'Donnell, the pharmacologist, testified that the 18 milligrams of morphine Charlotte Petrie received intravenously to relieve pain after her caesarean section was dangerously high considering the other painkillers she had received as well as the rigors of labor and her sleepiness.

He also said doctors should not have waited nearly 20 minutes before giving Petrie a shot of Narcan, an antidote to morphine.

"Time is of the essence," he said.

But under questioning by lawyers representing the doctors, he acknowledged that Petrie had received considerably more morphine in 1994 when she delivered her first child through a C-section, and suffered no ill effects.

Brian O'Dea, a spokesman for Newton-Wellesley, said yesterday in an e-mail that Petrie's death was a "terrible tragedy," but that doctors and nurses involved in her care feel "misjudged by the repeated publicity and criticism."

"These emotions are even more frustrating because . . . we will never know exactly what caused Mrs. Petrie's death," he wrote.

Jonathan Saltzman can be reached at jsaltzman@globe.com.