



Huntsville patient files class action lawsuit over CT scan overradiation

By Challen Stephens, The Huntsville Times

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Becky Coudert shows hair loss she believes was caused by an overdose of radiation from a CT perfusion scan.

HUNTSVILLE, AL -- Patients who may have received high doses of radiation during routine brain scans filed a class action lawsuit in Alabama today, accusing the manufacturer, G.E. Healthcare, of poor safety features in the design of the scanner.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration recently found that that CT perfusion scans, which are used to check for blockages and injuries in the brain, provided hundreds of patients in Los Angeles and Huntsville with roughly eight times the recommended radiation levels.

Becky Coudert, a teacher in Madison County Schools, had a scan on Sept. 8 at Huntsville Hospital. She said she soon lost her balance, had trouble with her memory and her hair fell out in a narrow band from ear to ear.

So far Coudert is the only patient identified by name in the federal lawsuit.

However, attorney Eric Artrip said he represents 15 similar patients in Huntsville. He is working with a second firm in Gadsen, and the two have teamed up with a California firm he said represents more than 200 similar patients in Los Angeles.

The suit is limited to the manufacturer. The case argues that the manufacturer "carelessly researched the design and failed to adequately test" its products, and that the scanners lacked safety features to warn of overdoses.

The class action suit asks G.E. Healthcare to set up a fund to cover future healthcare costs and payments, specifically providing regular monitoring for brain cancer in all affected patients. The suit sets a minimum figure of \$5 million.

G.E. Healthcare couldn't be reached late Tuesday, but it issued a statement last week that it was cooperating with the federal investigation, as well as reviewing scan protocols with officials at Huntsville Hospital.'

"GE has also confirmed that the GE scanners at Huntsville Hospital are operating as intended," read a statement emailed last week by company spokesman Arvind Gopalratnam. "As with all CT head perfusion scans, the radiation dose delivered was a decision made by healthcare providers during the treatment of stroke patients.

"This decision was based on the medical expertise of the Huntsville staff as well as the needs of the patient."

The firms expect to consolidate into a single federal class action suit filed in U.S. District Court in Alabama, said Artrip.

Artrip said the attorneys found no evidence of technician error, and he noted the same problem was found in Huntsville and three different hospitals in Los Angeles. "We don't have any credible information that this was Huntsville Hospital's fault," said Artrip on Tuesday.

The FDA, which has identified more than 250 cases of over-radiation, urged hospitals across the country last week to review the patients who have received the scan, to check the dosage levels provided and to be careful in the future that "dosing protocols are followed every time."

Huntsville Hospital spokesman Burr Ingram said on Monday that the hospital was still working to contact any patients who may have received a higher dose.

Since The Times published an article on Coudert and the FDA investigation last week, five patients have called the newsroom claiming to have similar hair loss after a brain scan.

One patient shared her written notification from the hospital, dated Dec. 11. The letter reads: "We have identified a few patients, including you, who have received a scan in which the dosage level was elevated."

The letter says the hospital is working with federal regulators and the manufacturer to review procedures. However, the letter says the hair loss and redness of the skin are temporary symptoms and should go away. "At this time, we have no recommendations for you to have any follow-up medical treatments."

The patient, a cosmetologist in Marshall County, said her hair also fell out in a thin band from ear to ear, she's suffered migraines and said at moments she's had trouble recalling her own name when logging onto email.

The lawsuit argues that the effects of over-radiation go beyond hair loss, and may not become apparent for 10, even 20 years. The suit makes several references to brain cancer and latent illnesses, arguing the genetic material of the brain cells was immediately damaged.

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