



Times Watchdog Report: Radiation overdoses leave patients with unanswered questions

By Challen Stephens, The Huntsville Times

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The U.S. Food and Drug Administration in December found 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 six to eight times the recommended dose of radiation.

Huntsville Hospital quickly announced plans to reach out to those patients.

"We contacted between 55 and 60 patients," said Hospital spokesman Burr Ingram this week. "We provided them an opportunity to talk with a radiologist if they had any questions or concerns."

But Kim Getty, who received that letter from the hospital, said she tried to call the radiologist, using the phone number from the letter. She said she left messages.

"I haven't heard anything from Huntsville Hospital other than that one letter," said Getty, a cosmetologist who said she suffers headaches and now loses track when driving or counting money. "I've asked Huntsville Hospital to call me. No one will call me."

Others didn't even get a letter and have had to track down their own scan records.

"Huntsville Hospital has gotten into a bunker and closed the doors," said Louis "Skip" Scipioni, who said the hospital has refused to treat or even see his wife.

His wife suffered a stroke in January of 2007. She received a brain scan at the time, and was discharged within a week. Scipioni said she soon developed strange symptoms, including the tell-tale hair loss in a band from ear to ear.

Ingram, the Huntsville Hospital spokesman, said he couldn't talk about individual patients. But when asked about medical treatment for affected patients, Ingram asked what they would be treated for.

Ingram said the FDA identified two common symptoms, hair loss and redness of the skin. "Both of these conditions were identified as temporary and would improve over time," he said.

But the FDA warnings also mention increased long-term risks for cancer and cataracts.

Scipioni said he never got a letter, and he had to fight to get the scan records from 2007, which weren't routinely stored at the time. Scipioni said he eventually found his wife had gotten six times the recommended dose and informed the hospital.



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Special to The Times

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

"They never asked me to bring my wife in," he said.

In Los Angeles, Cedars-Sinai Medical Center took a different approach. That hospital sent patients a letter offering to set up private meetings with a physician.

"You would think they would at least call us in for counseling to make us think they cared," said Martha Williams, a third-grade teacher at Montview who said she received high levels of radiation in September.

Williams, who said she received one of the initial letters, said she now has such loud ringing in her ears at times that she can't hear the radio. "The thing is, I can't say it's definitely from this. But it's never been like this before."

Williams and Scipioni joined a class action lawsuit filed in December. Filed by a trio of firms in Huntsville, Gadsden and Los Angeles, the suit names only the scanner manufacturer, GE Healthcare.

Eric Artrip, a Huntsville attorney, said the case now includes 51 people, 34 of whom were treated in Huntsville. He said many of them never received a letter.

Attorneys argue that the scanners lacked sufficient safety features to warn of an overdose. Artrip said the attorneys asked GE Healthcare to set up a medical monitoring fund to help affected patients. He said the request was denied.

A GE Healthcare spokesman on Wednesday e-mailed The Times that "the GE equipment at issue functioned properly." GE Healthcare on Monday moved to dismiss the suit, arguing, in part, that speculation of genetic damage or future illness didn't meet the legal standard for "present injury or illness."

Getty did not join the class action suit. She hired her own attorney. Two other patients in Alabama have filed separate suits. And time may have expired for others. Alabama has a two-year statute of limitations for medical malpractice.

"We follow FDA guidelines and recommendations," said Ingram at Huntsville Hospital, "and certainly place the safety of our patients as the highest priority."

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