

Legislature Approves Funds For Injured Infant

On September 13, 1990, Melanie Alonso brought her otherwise healthy and normal two-week-old infant, Jeanette, to Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami, Florida because of a recent onset of flu-like symptoms. The infant was admitted to the pediatric unit to undergo tests. Over several days the baby's condition generally worsened. In fact, she started experiencing seizure-like activity (abnormal jerking motions of her legs) and respiratory distress.

The intern responsible for Jeanette's care on the evening of September 17 was Dr. Noelle Ruddock. She had been at Jackson Memorial less than three months. Dr. Ruddock, a citizen of Jamaica and a graduate from the University of the West Indies Faculty of Medicine in the Bahamas, was not, nor was she required to be, licensed in Florida at the time she treated Jeanette Alonso.



***The Alonso Family:
Frank Jr., Melanie, Jeanette and Frank Sr.***

Near the beginning of Dr. Ruddock's shift on September 17, a nurse noticed and reported to her that Jeanette was having blood-tinged "burps." Dr. Ruddock theorized the baby may have been burping up blood swallowed at birth, or that she had either an irritated stomach lining or a sore in her mouth. Later, a nurse also noted that Jeannette had an abnormally low body temperature of 95.8. The nurse put a blanket on the baby and moved her to a warming bed. ***Continued on Page Four.***

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When Dr. Ruddock was informed of this later, she felt it was because the rooms on the ward were kept cold at night causing this low temperature. In summary, she failed to realize the significant connection between these symptoms and the seizures that Dr. Ruddock had herself witnessed and charted earlier that night.

A day before September 17, Jeanette's sodium level began to plummet to what Dr. Ruddock later admitted was an "abnormally low level." She attributed Jeanette's low sodium, or hyponatremia, to Syndrome of Inappropriate Antidiuretic Hormone Secretion (SIADH). Dr. Ruddock erroneously concluded that Jeanette was not actually low on sodium, but was retaining water which diluted her existing sodium level. Dr. Ruddock mistakenly elected not to add sodium via an IV drip, but rather restricted Jeanette's fluid intake. She left instructions that Jeanette was to be given no oral fluids and she reduced Jeanette's IV drip rate by one third. Unfortunately Jeanette's low sodium level remained critically low.

Dr. Ruddock's orders, which were based on an incorrect diagnosis, led to the continuation of seizures and respiratory arrest. By the time the error was discovered, Jeanette's brain was irreversibly damaged, and she was transferred to the pediatric intensive care (PICU). The admitting physician there noted that the seizures were likely secondary to decreased sodium, a condition that

could have been remedied with a \$2 bag of sodium chloride had it been diagnosed properly and timely.

Jeanette Alonso is now profoundly mentally handicapped. She is non-ambulatory and she has limited vision. Her hearing, however, is largely intact and she responds to familiar voices by smiling.

In September 1997, attorney David Kelley, pursuant to an agreement with Jackson Memorial Hospital, filed a claims bill in the Florida Legislature. Due to a State law placing a \$200,000 limit on injury claims against government-owned hospitals, this formal legislative appeal, called a "claims bill," was required.

At the Special Master's hearing, the attorney representing the Dade County Public Health Trust, which operates Jackson Memorial Hospital, summed up the hospital's position in one word -- "indefensible." He said after the facts had been investigated through the litigation process, the Public Health Trust assumed responsibility for the catastrophic injuries to Jeanette Alonso caused by the employees of the hospital. Due to the devastating damages in this case, the claims bill received full support in the Florida Senate, which voted 39 to 0 to pass the bill. Later, the House agreed by a vote of 91 to 19 to pass the bill as well. Governor Chiles allowed the bill to become law on April 14, 1998, thus authorizing a multi-million dollar settlement. This enabled Jeanette Alonso to receive the necessary funds for care over her lifetime. ■