

Doctors' Disregard for Patient Results in Death

On Feb. 13, 1993, Jack Coppenger, age 53, was admitted to the hospital complaining of abdominal pain, nausea, headache, and jaundice. Mr. Coppenger was a well-known community figure in the Pensacola area. He was a pastor at several local churches, and headed up a residential and educational facility for troubled boys. Mr. Coppenger had recently been out to dinner, and the hospital physicians initially suspected that he was suffering from a gallbladder attack.

After several days of testing, both Mr. Coppenger and his wife were told by the hospital physicians that they could expect to go home. On the morning of Feb. 16, Mr. Coppenger was packing to go home when he was informed that his gastroenterologist wanted to perform one more test, an endoscopic retrograde choledochopancreatography (ERCP). The Coppengers were told that the ERCP would be a final definitive diagnostic test to rule out gallstones.

An ERCP consists of an endoscope being placed in the patient's stomach, and smaller instruments being threaded into the bile, common, and pancreatic ducts. A small cutting instrument is used to release any stones or other debris which may be blocking the ducts.

Almost immediately after the procedure, Mr. Coppenger began to have gripping abdominal pain. Both his wife and his daughter stayed with him throughout the night, imploring the nurses to call a doctor to come

examine Mr. Coppenger. When the nurses did contact the doctor on call, he informed them that he had no intention of coming into the hospital and to administer more pain medication. Fearing that their beloved husband and father would die, Mrs. Coppenger and her daughter then called a family physician friend and tried unsuccessfully to have him intervene in Mr. Coppenger's treatment. They then called around to other hospitals in an effort to have an ambulance come pick him up.

Throughout the entire evening, Mr. Coppenger was screaming in abject pain, getting little relief from the massive doses of pain medication which were being administered. Mrs. Coppenger and her daughter spent the night futilely begging the nurses to recognize Mr. Coppenger's serious condition.

By the time the gastroenterologist returned in the morning, the Coppengers were livid about his lack of medical intervention.

In spite of pleas from family, medical staff ignored the situation.

They were informed that Mr. Coppenger had developed pancreatitis, a condition in which the pancreas becomes inflamed and secretes enzymes which are extremely toxic to the internal organs. Mr. Coppenger's condition deteriorated rapidly. On Feb. 19, Mr. Coppenger died. He was survived by his wife of 31 years, and his three children, Jill, Jennifer, and Jack.



Jackie and Jack Coppenger in 1982.

Attorneys Chris Searcy and Bill Norton filed suit and initiated discovery which was ultimately very damaging to the hospital and the physicians. The nurses testified that they failed to properly document Mr. Coppenger's input and output of fluids, which is extremely important in a case of pancreatitis. Additionally, Mr. Searcy and Mr. Norton were able to elicit nurse testimony that the doctor on call should have come in, and, in fact, the nurses urged him to do so.

Mr. Searcy and Mr. Norton, with the help of referring attorney George Daniel Stewart of Milton, Fla., were able to settle this case at mediation for \$675,000. After his death, the state of Florida recognized the years of service Mr. Coppenger gave so generously to children in Pensacola. In 1995, The Jack Coppenger House, a home for troubled boys, was opened in Mr. Coppenger's memory. ■

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