



NEWS

Nursing home must pay family \$3 million

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A Cook County jury has ordered a Homewood nursing home to pay \$3 million to the family of a woman who died in May 2001 after five days in its care.

Ana Carrasco, 57, was admitted to ManorCare Health Services for what was supposed to be a short stay to recover from being hospitalized and to get used to a new tube in her trachea.

Instead, she asphyxiated from mucous that built up in the tube when ManorCare staff failed to clean it adequately and didn't administer drugs prescribed to ease breathing, according to the family's lawsuit against the company. Carrasco was transferred to a hospital and died two days later.

The \$3 million verdict last Friday is the largest ever reported against an Illinois nursing home in a wrongful death case, according to the Cook County Jury Verdict Reporter.

The nursing home's parent company, Ohio-based HCR Manor Care, issued a written statement that expresses its "deepest sympathy" to Carrasco's family, but "we disagree with and are disappointed in the outcome of this case."

Carrasco's daughter, Sheila Albores, of Oak Forest, said she has been engaged in a four-year "quest" since her mother died, including a 2003 trip to Washington, D.C., to testify during a U.S. Senate hearing on nursing home quality.

"I don't want anyone to go through what we did," Albores said. "I still miss her every day. Her life mattered."

Carrasco had been treated two years earlier for epiglottal cancer. Scar tissue from the radiation was blocking her airway, so doctors put the tube in her trachea. From then on, she would have to breathe through the tube, but the cancer was gone, Albores said.

"She was looking at a phenomenal recovery and many years ahead of her," Albores said. "We just had received such great news."

She said she knew something was amiss when she visited her mother the day that Carrasco was transferred to ManorCare.

"She was in a state of panic," Albores said. "All those images and horrible stories about nursing homes, she's in it."

In the following days, she said, her mother complained that she was having trouble breathing, and Albores repeatedly asked the staff to suction the tube.

She said she made arrangements with a company to care for her mother at home and planned to remove her mother from the nursing home. The transfer was scheduled for the day after paramedics took Carrasco to St. James Hospital in Chicago Heights because she had stopped breathing, Albores said.

Attorney Steven Levin, who represented Albores, said the size of the verdict — most of it awarded for pain and suffering and the loss of Carrasco's company — reflects the magnitude of the harm.

"It's a horrible way to die — suffocating on your own mucous," Levin said. "Illinois has a nursing home care (law) that allows residents to sue for abuse and neglect, and this is a case that highlights the importance of that law."

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