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Husband files suit against Cancer Centers of America for wife's unnecessary suffering and untimely death

Chicago—Steven M. Levin of the Chicago law firm Levin & Perconti filed a lawsuit on February 21, 2008 on behalf of Ron Weidenfeller (Grand Rapids, MI) for the wrongful death of his wife, Maria, against Cancer Treatment Centers of America (CTCA), Inc. (Schaumburg, IL) and Midwestern Regional Medical Center (Zion, IL), an inpatient facility affiliated with (CTCA).

Fifty-seven year old Maria Weidenfeller led a busy and active life. Her passion and education in science and biology led to a career in medical technology and medical laboratory management. Shortly before her death, Maria was pursuing her Ph.D., managing the microbiology laboratory at Grand Valley State University and teaching microbiology lab classes. In her spare time, Maria was a master gardener, an Arthur Murray dance instructor, a master scuba diving instructor who trained instructors, an underwater photographer and the co-author of an ice diving manual.

In June 2006, Maria was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Her husband, Ron, recalled that Maria faced this challenge with the same courage and determination that had become her trademark. On July 19, 2006, Maria went to Cancer Treatment Centers of America for an evaluation. She went to their Zion, Illinois facility known as Midwestern Regional Medical Center for an initial consultation. After conducting an evaluation and prescribing a treatment plan, Midwestern Regional Medical Center predicted a 70% cure rate for someone with Maria's level of illness.

On July 24, 2006, Maria began the inpatient chemotherapy treatments recommended by Midwestern Regional Medical Center. The plan was to admit Maria to the facility for one

week of cancer treatments, release her and then have her return for another week-long stay in the facility.

Shortly after Maria started treatment, she began experiencing severe pain and distention of her abdomen, cramping and severe constipation. Maria and Ron reported Maria's symptoms to the doctor and expressed their concern about a possible bowel obstruction. They also inquired as to whether Maria should undergo tests to rule out blockages. Doctors told the Weidenfellers that as long as Maria had occasional bowel movements there was nothing to worry about. Although Ron stayed with Maria for twelve hours each day during her week-long stays, he worried about her increasing discomfort.

On September 18, 2006, when Maria returned to Cancer Treatment Centers' facility for her third round of treatments, she complained to staff that she had been experiencing pain and constipation for over five days. Despite Maria's discomfort and the fact that her abdomen was consistently distended, staff continued treatment for her cancer but waited four days after Maria's admission to order treatment for the constipation.

Ron Weidenfeller explained what happened next, "On September 23, 2006, as I was getting ready to pick up Maria to take her home, I got a call from the doctor advising me to get to the hospital right away. I was told that Maria had been placed in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU). When I arrived at the hospital I was told that Maria had developed blood clots and that she was probably not going to make it. I immediately called our sons, Craig and James, and told them to come to the hospital right away."

Ron continued, "I was with Maria until 9 o'clock the night before. She was supposed to be coming home with me. I could not believe what I encountered when I arrived in the ICU. Maria was in obvious distress and experiencing excruciating pain. Her skin was ashen and

her hands were cold to the touch. I looked at the monitors and watched helplessly as Maria's blood pressure continued to drop. She was having difficulty breathing. Then Maria began coughing up a vile, dark substance and her vital signs began to crash. Doctors and nurses tried to resuscitate her but she died a short time later. Everything happened so fast that our sons did not even have the chance to say 'goodbye' to their mother."

Attorney Steven Levin said, "After Maria died, Ron had questions about what caused her death. He requested that Cancer Center of America perform an autopsy to find out why Maria's condition changed so rapidly. Unfortunately, the staff tried to talk him out of it. Ron decided to have an independent autopsy performed. He learned that Maria's colon had ruptured and that she had died from sepsis due to a perforated colon. He also learned that the substance that Maria had been choking on was fecal matter."

Attorney Steven Levin said, "Maria was a young, vibrant, accomplished and loving wife and mother. The pain and suffering that she endured was preventable and unnecessary. How ironic that while Cancer Treatment Centers of America advertises hope to patients in hopeless situations, their staff allowed a common condition to turn deadly. When a patient complains of severe constipation, vomiting and has a consistently distended abdomen, there is ample reason to investigate."

Levin added, "Whatever amount of time Maria had left was taken from Ron Weidenfeller and their two sons. Her painful death was not caused by cancer; it was caused by a failure to treat her constipation which caused her colon to rupture."

"This should not have happened to Maria. No one should have to go through the agony that Maria endured. My hope is that telling her story will prevent this type of tragedy from happening to other families. Maria was even deprived of the comfort of her family in the

final moments of her life,” Ron Weidenfeller said.

The following is an excerpt from Maria’s eulogy written by her husband, Ron Weidenfeller:

“Maria had a natural talent for teaching and working with people. She always received excellent evaluations from her students, and the people that used to work for her also mentioned that they never got a bad evaluation from her. I told them that she never had a bad employee as she always tried to inspire them to do their very best and worked with them to achieve it.

Maria had so much to give in life, and always brought out the best in everyone. Maybe there was a student in one of her labs, that wasn’t quite sure if they wanted to keep pursuing a profession in the medical field. After being in her class, perhaps that would change the student’s mind, and that student would someday go on to find a cure for a disease such as cancer. With that cure, Maria’s way of giving would be carried on through her students accomplishments.

Maria led a life well lived and that is a precious gift. She was a dancer, an underwater photographer, a master scuba instructor, a master gardener, a pilot, a scientist, a jewelry maker and an author.

Most of all she was a good and loving friend and a wonderful sister, cousin, aunt, mother and wife. You will be sorely missed but you will never ever be forgotten. We will always have our loving and lasting memories of you that our grateful hearts will always treasure.”