

Post-Anesthesia Nursing Care: Physician Not Informed Promptly, Nurses Negligent.

During an aortofemoral bypass graft the surgeon completely clamps off blood flow to the patient's legs.

In this case the clamping continued for an unusual length of time because of abnormal calcification of the patient's renal arteries.

In the ensuing malpractice litigation the patient's own medical expert conceded the surgeon did nothing wrong. Instead, the finger of blame was pointed directly at the hospital's post-anesthesia care unit nurses.

Post-Anesthesia Care Unit Nursing Care

The patient's nurse performed an assessment as soon as the patient got to the PACU. Post-tibial pulses could be detected bilaterally with the Doppler and the patient was able to move both lower extremities without difficulty.

Shortly thereafter, however, the patient began to report persistent severe pain, loss of feeling in his legs and a sensation of pressure in his legs and pelvis. The patient's nurse began to notice that his legs were turning pale and were cool to the touch.

His blood pressure was low when he arrived in the PACU and continued to drop.

When the skin on the right leg began to show mottling the nurse then on duty finally contacted the surgeon.

The surgeon was first contacted concerning the changes in the patient's status at 8:40 p.m., the patient having arrived in the PACU at 6:42 p.m.

The Michigan Court of Appeals noted for the record that a different nurse than the one on duty at 6:42 p.m. took over the patient's care at 7:45 p.m. At that moment the nurse on duty was reportedly busy finishing her charting and left to go home at 8:05 p.m.

When the surgeon got to the hospital at 9:12 p.m. he immediately had the patient returned to the operating room for a second surgery. A blood clot was found and removed from the site of the graft done earlier that day.

The jury ruled that the hospital's post-anesthesia recovery nurses were negligent for the way they monitored the patient's condition and for the time they let go by before they reported to the physician.

An extended period of vascular occlusion led to ischemia, cell death and permanent damage to the muscles and nerves in the patient's legs.

COURT OF APPEALS OF MICHIGAN
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The patient's malpractice lawsuit against the hospital alleged that the two nurses in the PACU were negligent.

The nurses were ruled negligent because they failed to contact the surgeon promptly to report signs of a post-surgical vascular emergency, which delayed the start of the second surgery.

The court rejected medical testimony that the clot was not there until right before the surgeon was called. The testimony was offered by a medical expert retained to testify for the defense.

The court found the testimony only speculative in that it was formulated after the fact for the hospital's defense. The court looked instead at the nurses' charting of events as they transpired.

When the second nurse took over she charted that the patient was already losing the ability to move his legs and was losing feeling in his legs, almost an hour before she notified the physician.

That was enough proof that there were signs that the problem had started, the nurses knew or should have known about it and should have reported to the surgeon, in the court's judgment. ***Ykimoff v. W.A. Foote Memorial Hosp.***, __ N.W. 2d __, 2009 WL 2136289 (Mich. App., July 16, 2009).