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PRN Medication Order: Nurses Faulted, Delayed Medication, No Harm To Patient.

The Court of Appeal of Louisiana recently ruled that a civil jury was wrong not to find the hospital's nurses negligent. The court overruled the jury and ordered a judgment to be entered against the hospital for the patient's death from a stroke. He was hospitalized for a bleeding duodenal ulcer and was getting blood products. He had a history of hypertension.

Four months later, after hearing additional evidence, the court reversed itself. Careful review of the ICU brain scans showed the patient in fact died from a thrombotic stroke, not a hemorrhagic stroke. A thrombotic stroke, the court reasoned, would not be caused or made more likely by the nurses' actions, whether or not the nurses' actions fell below the legal standard of care. The court dismissed the case.

Physician's PRN Medication Order

The orders included vital signs every four hours and Procardia PRN for blood pressure above 160/95.

The nurses took his vitals at 4:00 p.m. His blood pressure was 170/100 but they did not give the Procardia.

The patient's vitals were taken again at 7:30 p.m. His blood pressure was 173/100 and he got the Procardia.

He became unresponsive at midnight. All the signs indicated a stroke.



A medication ordered by the physician PRN is to be given without unnecessary delay when the patient meets the assessment criteria set by the physician for the medication.

In this case the standard of care required the nurses to take the patient's vital signs every four hours, give the Procardia if his blood pressure rose above 160/95, and not wait nearly four hours.

COURT OF APPEAL OF LOUISIANA, 2001.

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Nursing Standard of Care
A physician's PRN medication order means the medication must be given without unreasonable delay when the patient's condition fits the assessment criteria set by the physician for giving the medication, the court ruled.

How much delay is reasonable varies. The experts in this case all agreed nearly four hours is too long to wait to give a heart medication with anti-hypertensive properties to a patient with markedly elevated blood pressure.

Even if a caregiver's professional conduct is negligent there must be cause and effect linking the negligence with harm to the patient or no judgment to pay damages will be entered.

To decide the negligence issue the courts accept nurses as expert witnesses on the nursing standard of care. Cause and effect is a medical question.

Pharmacy's Turn-Around Time

The court ruled that a hospital's policy for how quickly the pharmacy must fill orders has no bearing on how quickly nurses must give urgently needed medications. The court said it is not good enough for a nurse to fax off an order and wait around for something the patient urgently needs. **Piro v. Chandler, 780 So. 2d 394 (La. App., 2001).**