

# Self-Harm: Courts Faults Psych Facility.

The patient was admitted to the hospital's psychiatric unit for what the Court of Appeals of Texas described as bizarre and delusional behavior.

While a patient on the unit she was found to have severe caustic chemical burns on her feet. The injuries were assumed to be self-inflicted.

The court found the evidence inconclusive that the hospital was negligent for failing to discover these injuries at the time of admission. However, that left open only one possibility, that the injuries were somehow self-inflicted while the patient was in the hospital.

Nevertheless, the court stated what it believed were relevant elements of the standard of care at the time of admission and during a patient's stay in a psychiatric facility.

## **Admission Assessment / Exam**

A psychiatric facility should carefully inspect the entire body and contents of clothing and shoes. A thorough medical physical exam should be done.

A history should be obtained from the patient, but the facility should not rely solely on what the patient says. Instead, family members and others should be questioned about the patient's condition and recent activities.

An attempt should be made to try to get the patient to understand and collaborate with needed medical interventions such as administration of medications.

## **Ongoing Assessment / Observation**

The court stressed the importance of close, frequent observation of a psychiatric patient to ascertain the patient's location and activities. Psychiatric patients must be assumed always to be at risk for self-harm and/or elopement.

The court accepted as an expert witness an advance practice registered nurse certified as a specialist in adult psychiatric and mental health nursing. In re Baptist Hospitals of SE Texas, 2006 WL 2506412 (Tex. App., August 31, 2006).