

Next of Kin Education Project

OTHER FAMILY'S STORIES

Here are just a few of the stories that we have gathered from other families who have experienced the pain of not being notified by a hospital that their loved ones had been hospitalized or had died.

The Johnson's Family Story*

On Saturday evening, January 16, 2005, I opened the first bill that had come from a hospital in Chicago for my brother, Jim Johnson. It read:

December 17, 2004
CRITICAL CARE, FIRST HOUR, \$681.00
INSERT EMERGENCY AIRWAY, \$426.00

Jim had moved to the city for a fresh start in the summer and we had not heard much from him. He was never a great communicator and we often spoke about how "Oh, he's fine, he's just busy." Besides, we told our mother, if something ever happened to him, someone would be sure to let us know.

The following morning, Sunday, January 17, 2005, after church, I called the hospital to inquire if my brother was still there. After being transferred many times, an ICU secretary bluntly told me that Jim had died a month ago, December 17, 2004. Stunned, I asked, "Where is he now?" and my call was transferred to Admitting where I discovered that Jim was indeed still there . . . downstairs in their morgue. Horrified, I said we would come into the city in the morning.

The next day, Monday, my sister Teresa and her husband John, my husband and I drove to the hospital. The manager of Admitting took us into a small office and asked, "What do you know?" Huh? We really didn't know anything. He kept telling us that he couldn't share any information with us. Dumbfounded by his muteness, we pleaded for someone else we might talk with. We were walked upstairs to a prayer room, to wait.

After a long time, a Nursing Executive arrived and announced that she wouldn't be of much help either but then proceeded to ask "What do you know?" By this time my heartbreak and frustration overflowed. Their lack of compassion, almost indifference, was stunning. Why were we so unwelcome? Their only concern was, "What do you know?" How could we know anything? That's what we were there for.

We asked if there was some place where we could get some water, sit and talk. We just really wanted to connect with someone and piece things back together. We were devastated. After being warned about the appearance of a month old body, John went to the morgue. He identified the body and collected Jim's belongings. We kept asking, "How could this happen?" "What really happened?" The circular explanation offered was that the death certificate was not satisfactory to the Medical Examiners office, that the doctor was on family medical leave, that the Medical Examiner wouldn't take the body because of the error and since the ME never got the body. And they really couldn't say much more. Apparently the death certificate was still incomplete at that time.

Hoping to meet and speak with someone who had actually cared for my brother, we returned to the hospital three different times before eventually going away broken. It was just too painful and too

confusing. On the last visit we finally saw Jim's doctor. She said she had never met my brother and only spoke with the hospital by phone and didn't complete the first death certificate until two weeks after he had died.

Jim had been working at running the kitchens (and staying) at a homeless shelter near the hospital. He was brought in, unconscious and never able to speak for himself and it appears that he had no advocate at that hospital. Inside his wallet, along with his drivers license and other ID was a list of family names and phone numbers. While they took the time to check his ID for a billing address, his date of birth and social security number, they must have never looked any further. Perhaps, assuming he was homeless too. I must say, even homeless folks have hurting families who love them. Jim was admitted to the ER at six in the morning and died about 9 in the evening. All through that long day, none of the family listed in his wallet nor anyone where he was working and living was contacted. Somebody could have been there with him and that hurts. And what about stashing a body in the basement for a month? Does that happen a lot?

Mistakes happen every day and the first person who assumed, "He must just be a homeless guy" made a horrible mistake. I can forgive that. However, dozens of people must have had the opportunity to correct that mistake and did not. "Doesn't this guy have any family?" "Are you sure?"

We do not know what kind of medical care Jim received. "Adequate", is what we guess, and we are grateful for that. Sadly, we will never really know.

But we did get a bill.

The Brass Family Story

My name is Jan Brass. I live in North Little Rock, Arkansas.

On June 4, 2002, my son, Matthew David Brown, was admitted to Scripps Mercy Hospital, San Diego. He was very ill and was brought in my ambulance. He was able to give them my telephone number. He was admitted to the hospital and was in much pain. From his records, it appears that he became agitated and would or could not give them any information regarding review of systems, etc. Again, my telephone number was on the ambulance service run sheet. Matt also had his Arkansas Driver's license in his wallet with his name and our address on it. The hospital never contacted me to inform me of his admission.

Matt died the next day, June 5, 2002. I was never notified. He was sent to the coroner, who also never contacted me.

I received a statement from the ambulance service around the middle or last part of June. The statement showed that Matt was taken to Scripps. Since I had not heard from Matt since Mother's Day, I immediately called Scripps and inquired about him. I was told that he was admitted on June 4 and was discharged on June 5. I assumed he was fine.

After still not hearing from my son, I began calling to see if anyone had seen him. Finally, in August, I wrote the chaplaincy service at Scripps to see if they would check his records to see where he was discharged or to see if they had had further contact with him. We were called on August 23, 2002, and advised that our son had died on June 5 and was given the coroner's telephone number.

The coroner still had our son's body but had made no effort to contact us even though they had in their possession our son's Arkansas Driver's license with our address on it. I don't know if the hospital had given them the ambulance run sheet, which had our telephone number, on it or not.

Since it had been almost three months, we had to have our son's body cremated. We brought him home and had his funeral.

Needless to say, we are all still in shock. My son had a substance abuse problem but always kept in contact with us.

We now have a lawsuit filed against Scripps and the San Diego County Coroner for failure to notify us as next of kin. Your law went into effect in California January 2002. The hospital has told us that they had no duty to notify, they have requested the suit be dismissed based upon a couple of cases of failure to notify that were dismissed prior to the law becoming effective.

My goal with the lawsuits is to not have this happen to anyone else. How many times has it happened? I just don't want any other family to go through what we are going through. Thinking about my son being there for almost three months is just devastating.

If the hospital had contacted me when he was admitted, I would have had time to get there to be with him when he died. I could have seen him, touched him, prayed for him, had a priest anoint him. Due to their failure to notify, none of this happened.

Jan Brass

The Roberts' Family Story

Lillian Roberts's son David was in an accident near her home in Crowne Point Indiana. He was taken to a hospital only ten miles from her home, yet despite the fact that he was unconscious and in critical condition and that they found her information as his emergency contact, Lillian wasn't called for two days. The call came from the coroner's office where her son was taken when he passed away late that night. She would have had plenty of time to get to the hospital and be with her son, if only she'd been called. When questioned why they didn't call her, the hospital first said that he had been at that hospital for some routine tests for before being hired for a new job. On the application he said that he was single – so they didn't bother calling anyone. Later they said they tried to call Lillian and received no answer. When she proved she had been home it changed to no answering machine. Later it was proven that they never made any attempt at all, and her son David was simply left to die alone, basically due to hospital's indifference.

The Knickman Family Story

As reported on WBAL, Channel 11 NBC Baltimore

BALTIMORE -- A local family panicked when a loved one turned up missing. For nine days, they said they did everything to find him, but Paul Knickman wasn't really lost.

It happened suddenly at a Glen Burnie gas station. Paul Knickman, 63, had gotten out of his car to fill up when he collapsed and stopped breathing. An ambulance rushed Knickman to Baltimore-Washington Medical Center.

Eighteen minutes after he arrived, a doctor pronounced him dead. Knickman had suffered a heart attack. Patrick Knickman, son: "We didn't know what happened to my father. We didn't know where he was." Patrick said the family was overwhelmed with fear. They called police, hospitals and even the medical examiner's office. They also filed a missing person's report.

Nine days later, they finally found Paul Knickman. His body had been considered unclaimed and was at the Maryland Anatomy Board.

Dr. Ron Wade, Maryland Anatomy Board: "We have the right to exclusive control of the body primarily for health reasons."

Wade said in Maryland, unclaimed bodies are eventually cremated or used for medical research.

Laura Knickman, daughter-in-law: "It's very scary and I think everyone in the state should know that no one in this situation had a legal obligation to notify next of kin to contact the family."

Anne Arundel County police said they tried to make notification including a trip to Knickman's home in Pasadena, but he lived alone. They said they asked neighbors to alert family members.

In any event, they claimed it was the hospital's responsibility to find Knickman's next of kin. His family later spoke with a hospital representative.

Patrick Knickman: "And she made the comment that they didn't call anybody because there were too many Knickmans in the phone book."

In a written statement, Baltimore-Washington Medical Center said the hospital is "confident that we conducted a reasonable search in this case. Over the 72 hours that we were in control of the notification process, we worked closely with the police."

But police point to their report and a notation that the medical center will be notifying Knickman's next of kin. And although it's not noted in the report, police said the hospital was to contact them if it needed additional help.

Lt. David Watlemeyer, Anne Arundel County police: "The hospital never called us and informed us that no one had come and identified him."

All of this may not have happened had Knickman died at home, was killed in a car accident or murdered. In any of those cases, an Anne Arundel County police supervisor would have been mandated to reach a family member.

Laura Knickman, daughter-in-law: "Who has responsibility so we can tell friends and family what they are supposed to do. What they can expect, how they can make sure they aren't unclaimed, unwanted and shipped off."

Judy Hallman: "I think it's horrible. It should never happen to any family member. There is no excuse." Judy Hallman is part of Seniors and Law Enforcement Together or SALT. She's trying to set up a statewide elder task force.

Hallman: "They would free up the officer and let them get back out on the street and they would take over trying to locate the family."

Illinois Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr. calls it a national issue. His bill will make it mandatory that hospitals call the next of kin of any patient who comes into the hospital unconscious or physically unable to give informed consent, within 24 hours. It will also help fund and establish a next-of-kin registry.

Jackson: "That's what this bill seeks to do, not to frustrate missions of hospitals but to provide the next of kin the resources they need to know what's happening with a loved one."

Paul Knickman's family finally retrieved his body. They buried him 19 days after his death.

They said they will do whatever they can to get a next-of-kin law passed so other families won't have to go through what they did.

Illinois, Texas and California already have next-of-kin notification laws. In Maryland, the Department on Aging and the SALT are distributing medication record cards.

You can list an emergency contact on it and place it in your wallet. They said it is also a good idea to keep emergency next-of-kin information on your refrigerator or in your cell phone.

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The Abedin Family Story

washingtonpost.com

Hospital Bill Is Family's Only Clue

Relatives Weren't Notified of Md. Man's Hit-and-Run Death

By Yolanda Woodlee

Washington Post Staff Writer

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The family of Joynal Abedin worried for more than two weeks after the father of four failed to return home from work the week before Christmas.

Then, on Jan. 5, Abedin's wife, Razia Begum, received a \$17,000 bill from Washington Hospital Center in the mail. She rushed to the hospital with family friends to see whether it had anything to do with her husband.

Because of federal privacy laws, Begum had to wait one more day before her fear was confirmed: Her husband had been killed in a hit-and-run accident in Prince George's County.

He was just a two-minute walk from their home in Silver Spring. Although he was carrying identification, some of it contained a previous address, and Prince George's County police had been unable to locate his family, police officials said.

Cpl. Diane Richardson said yesterday that an officer had gone to the Hyattsville address listed on Abedin's driver's license but did not find the family there. At the time, Abedin was still alive.

But Abedin's family and friends are asking why police could not find the family when the hospital could find the correct address to send a bill, and why police did not match the victim's identity with a missing person's report the family filed with Montgomery County police.

It is not clear whether police continued to check on Abedin's condition or whether the hospital notified police of Abedin's death. Police said they do not routinely match unidentified adult victims with computerized missing person's reports.

Family friends said that Abedin's youngest child, Zakir, 13, called a Montgomery County detective every day to ask whether officers had found his father, who moved to the Washington area from Bangladesh 10 years ago.

LeRoy Tillman, a spokesman for Washington Hospital Center, said it was not the role of hospital officials to notify the family.

"It is the responsibility of the authorities investigating the incident to identify the injured person and to notify their family members or next of kin," Tillman said. "We could not legally release any information about the patient's identity because of federal confidentiality laws. It would have been inappropriate."

The saga of Abedin's death, first reported on Fox 5 News, has angered many in the Bangladeshi community. The Embassy of Bangladesh and others in the community donated money to help pay for Abedin's family to accompany his body to Bangladesh for burial.

Wasim Ashraf, head of the embassy's consular section, said Abedin had a green card and was an "excellent worker" who had previously served as a domestic aide in the homes of several ambassadors.

"That really hurt us," Ashraf said. "Anyone who came across him was impressed with his work, and they really liked him."

Abedin, 50, a chef at an Adelphi Indian restaurant, was hit about 10:30 p.m. Dec. 18 while crossing the street after getting off the bus at New Hampshire Avenue and Metzert Road in Adelphi, according to Prince George's police. He was taken to Washington Hospital Center, where he died just after midnight. His body was sent to the D.C. medical examiner's office, according to hospital officials.

Kazi Arif Hossain, 38, a longtime friend of Abedin's, said: "I'm really, really upset about how they handled this, the hospital and the police, especially the police, because he had a phone book in his pocket" with family information. "He had a wallet with his ID."

Hossain said he was troubled that the family learned of Abedin's fate only after receiving the hospital bill. Because Abedin's wife does not speak English, Hossain went with her to the hospital.

Hospital officials told Hossain that federal law prohibited them from releasing any information on the patient. For the next 16 hours, they pleaded with police and hospital officials to tell them whether they knew the whereabouts of Abedin.

"Can you tell me what happened to this person?" Hossain said he asked repeatedly of hospital officials. "Is he still alive or dead?"

On Jan. 6, Hossain was finally told to go to the D.C. medical examiner's office, where it was confirmed that Abedin was dead.

"I said, 'It can't be true. He's been missing almost two weeks. He died on Dec. 19, and nobody contacted us,' " Hossain recalled saying. "If we hadn't got a hospital bill, we may not have found my friend."

The Stoll Family Story -- What SHOULD happen when an unidentified patient arrives in the ED



METRO & STATE

May 15, 2005

RUTH HOLLADAY

Nurse goes the extra mile to track down runner's kin

Tammy G. Meyer couldn't stop worrying about the young man lying in the cardiac critical-care unit at Methodist Hospital.

Heavily medicated, he was unconscious, breathing with a ventilator. Meyer is a registered nurse on the floor. She knew it was vital for his family to be there when he came around.

But how to find them? All the staff knew is that he was Gregory Stoll, 26, Broad Ripple. He had collapsed in cardiac arrest at the finish line of the OneAmerica 500 Festival Mini-Marathon on May 7. Race officials had no emergency contact information for him.

Meyer is 30, a wife and mother of two young sons. She works the 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. weekend shift. She became a nurse to help people. So nobody was surprised when she pulled out the Indianapolis phone book and called the six Stolls there -- with no luck.

Next she got her patient's cell phone number, through admitting. The area code was San Francisco. Eighteen Stolls were listed. She called every one. Again, nothing.

By 11:30 p.m., Meyer quit hunting, but she never gave up. At her Greenfield home the next morning, she kept thinking about what else she could do. Her husband, Brian, took their boys to a Mother's Day cookout so she could rest. But she couldn't sleep.

She concentrated on Stoll's mother. "What if it was one of my boys?" she wondered. When her own mother called, she asked for prayers.

On the West Coast, Christine Stoll, 55, had received her first Mother's Day call at 7 a.m. from Brent Stoll, her older son. She waited to hear from Greg, a computer programmer in Indy. She and her husband, Don, knew he had run the race Saturday. She was positive he would call.

Tammy Meyer returned to work Sunday to excellent news: The day-shift nurse had gotten Stoll's e-mail from race organizers. That linked him to Princeton University.

Meyer searched for his name on the school's Web site. Bingo -- Greg Stoll is a talented athlete. She found stories and photos. Not only did she know then that the Princeton alum was her patient, she learned he had graduated from a Lake Forest, Calif., high school.

"At 6 p.m. Sunday, the phone finally rang," said Chris Stoll, a history teacher. "It was a lady at the other end. She kept asking questions: 'Do you have a son named Greg? Does he live in Indianapolis? Can you tell me his address?'"

The call was emotional for Meyer, as well as for Stoll. "It was the hardest thing I have ever had to do -- to tell her that he had cardiac arrested."

Chris and Don Stoll arrived early Monday in Indianapolis. They were with Greg when he came to. He is recovering, his mother said.

The Stolls have identified one goal in this ordeal: They want all races to require emergency contacts. Stoll has no history of heart disease. "If this can happen to him, it could happen to anyone," his mother said.

He registered online. Emergency contact was not on the form. Organizers expected runners to write that on their bibs, but many ignore it, as Stoll did.

Jeff Graves, the Mini's executive director, said Friday the form now includes an emergency contact slot, added this past week. Stoll's experience is why.

The family's focus now is on Greg's health. They are grateful for the good care he has received at Methodist. Especially from his nurse. "When she called, it was more like mother to mother than nurse to patient's family," Chris Stoll said. "She never gave up."

Ruth Holladay's column appears Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday. You can reach her at (317) 444-6405 or via e-mail at ruth.holladay@indystar.com