

# Baby Dies In Hospital, And Parents Plan to Sue

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He was their first child, and Ana and Giovanni Vargas feared they might lose him even before birth. Doctors discovered a heart valve defect and called the pregnancy high-risk. But little Gianni was born full-term by Caesarean section on Jan. 30, weighing almost 8 pounds.

Then his parents worried about whether he would survive delicate corrective heart surgery last Saturday. They were thrilled when the operation was declared a success and doctors said he would go home in a week or so.

But then a seemingly tiny mistake occurred while Gianni was recuperating in the neonatal intensive care unit of Stony Brook University Hospital in Stony Brook, N.Y. A missing decimal point in a prescription resulted in a tenfold overdose of intravenous potassium chloride, the Vargases said they were told by hospital officials, and Gianni died early Tuesday.

Only after Gianni's death did his mother and father hold him in their arms for the first time. "I am angry because I was so close to bringing him home," Mr. Vargas said yesterday at a news conference. His wife, a native of the Dominican Republic who spoke through an interpreter, said she could not explain how she felt.

The couple, who live in Brentwood, appeared in the Lake Grove office of their lawyer, David Raimondo, and announced that they were filing a notice of claim as a prelude to a malpractice lawsuit for wrongful death.

The hospital acknowledged the infant's death, which Newsday reported yesterday, and ordered an immediate internal investigation. As required, it also notified the State Health Department, which started its own inquiry.

"We are sincerely sorry and extend to the grieving family our heartfelt condolences," said the hospital's director, Bruce Schroffel. "We are conducting a thorough investigation of this baby's death to determine what steps are necessary to ensure that this will never happen again."

Experts say that poorly written or carelessly read prescriptions are a common source of medical mistakes that harm patients. And among wrongly administered medications, potassium chloride is one of five most frequently involved, they say.

Gianni's prescription was supposed to be for 3.5 units of potassium chloride but instead was written as 35, the Vargases said they were told. They said they did not know who wrote the prescription.

Recommended preventive measures include the preparation of potassium chloride by hospital pharmacists instead of by nurses, and the use of computerized systems that automatically challenge prescriptions that appear to be inappropriate.

Stony Brook hospital declined to comment on whether it uses pharmacists to prepare potassium chloride and if it has a computerized prescription system. It did say that its procedures had called for checking medications at three different steps, and that in the aftermath of the fatality, hospital administrators doubled the number of staff members involved. The hospital would not say how many people that is.

"Medication errors are fixable, and there is no excuse for them occurring at the rate they are," said Arthur A. Levin, who was on the committee that wrote "To Err Is Human," a 1999 report on medical mistakes written for the Institute of Medicine at the National Academy of Sciences..

The national group that reviews hospitals, the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations, named potassium chloride as a problem-prone medication in 1999. In another report last year on prescriptions, the group stressed the critical importance of the decimal point, especially in handwritten documents.

"Misinterpretation of such orders could lead to a tenfold dosing error," the report said.

Mr. Vargas married Ana after meeting her at their church. He said he is a construction union member and worked at ground zero from Sept. 15 until he was laid off on Dec. 17.

He and his wife chose Stony Brook because of its reputation for quality, he said. Many relatives have been treated there, including his sister, who gave birth a few weeks ago. But Mr. Vargas said that he and his wife do not intend to return.