

Owner of imaging firm linked to patient deaths in indictment

By: Meredith Cohn, The Baltimore Sun

The owner of an Owings Mills imaging firm was accused in a federal indictment this week of contributing to the deaths of four people whose disease and infection were not caught on X-rays because employees were not qualified to read them.

Rafael Chikvashvili, the owner of Alpha Diagnostics LLC in Owings Mills and Harrisburg, Pa., had already been indicted on charges of defrauding Medicare and Medicaid of more than \$7.5 million.

On Thursday, a federal grand jury added four counts of health care fraud resulting in serious bodily harm and death — a charge that carries the potential for a life sentence — according to the office of the U.S. attorney for Maryland.

Prosecutors say Chikvashvili, 67, directed employees who were not doctors to interpret X-rays, medical tests, ultrasounds and cardiological exams rather than paying licensed physicians for the assessments.

They say he also directed workers in Owings Mills and Harrisburg, Pa., to draft fake doctors' examination reports, and then forged doctor signatures himself. Prosecutors say Chikvashvili holds a doctorate in mathematics but is not a physician.

Chikvashvili's attorney said the charges have no merit.

"Our client denies all the charges, and he looks forward to contesting them in court," attorney Jonathan Biran said.

Chikvashvili was initially indicted in September, when prosecutors accused him of filing false claims to the government health programs Medicaid and Medicare from 1997 until October 2013.

The government has been pursuing Medicare and Medicaid fraud more aggressively, said James Quiggle, a spokesman for the [Coalition Against Insurance Fraud](#), a watchdog group. But it's unusual for them to try to link the activity to deaths.

Most health care providers who are accused of defrauding the government are trying to "fly under the radar," Quiggle said.

They are more likely to pad their bills or steal patients' identities and make up claims, he said, rather than actually provide substandard care — which invites scrutiny from other medical providers and law enforcement.

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In each of the four deaths linked to Chikvashvili in the indictment, prosecutors say he and his employees missed crucial information on X-rays because they were not interpreted by a qualified radiologist. They missed congestive heart failure, pneumonia and a large pelvic mass, prosecutors say.

With proper image interpretations, they say, the patients' treatment would have been different.

In one case, prosecutors say, an employee reported seeing no chronic health conditions in the chest X-ray of a woman with congestive heart failure.

The patient died four days after the images were taken. Prosecutors say she "would have lived longer than she did" if her scans were properly assessed by a qualified radiologist and she were diagnosed and treated.

In another case, prosecutors say, a woman was cleared for surgery after Alpha Diagnostics failed to detect her congestive heart failure, a condition that can cause