

Hospital fires technician who substituted medication

By: Luis Fabregas

Jefferson Regional Medical Center on Wednesday notified 362 patients that they may have received a non-narcotic medication instead of the intended painkiller oxycodone, hospital officials said.

The hospital fired a pharmacy technician who switched the medications while packaging drugs in the pharmacy at the 369-bed facility in Jefferson Hills.

Hospital officials refused to identify the worker or say if the oxycodone was stolen for the workers use or for illegal sale outside the hospital.

An internal hospital investigation led officials there to contact several state and federal agencies, including the Pennsylvania Attorney General's Office, the federal Drug Enforcement Administration and the state Department of Health.

We have received information from the hospital, but we don't disclose details of ongoing investigations, said Nils Frederiksen, spokesman for state Attorney General Linda Kelly.

The affected patients received care at the hospital between June and October, but hospital spokeswoman Mary Beth Lowery said she was not permitted to say in which department they were treated. She would not identify the substitute medication, saying only that the patients received a non-narcotic drug.

Jefferson Regional is not aware of any adverse reactions or side effects as a result of the medication substitution in our patients, and has determined that it is very unlikely that the substituted medications will cause any harm, or have any lasting effects, the hospital said in a statement.

The agencies involved in the investigation would not say if charges have been or will be filed against the worker. Jefferson Hills police Chief Gene Roach said his department was not involved in the investigation and that he learned about the case on Wednesday when hospital officials sent him a statement prepared for the media.

Anytime you have someone in the inside, that gives them a license to steal, said Jim Quiggle, spokesman for the **Coalition Against Insurance Fraud** in Washington. It's very hard to prevent because a (pharmacy) tech may have so much access to information.

People who take drugs from the workplace can be addicted to drugs or sell the drugs for a huge markup to dealers, Quiggle said.

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Coalition Against Insurance Fraud

Hospitals have safeguards in place to protect access to narcotics, said Dr. Neil Capretto, a psychiatrist and medical director of Gateway Rehabilitation Center in Center, Beaver County. That includes keeping drugs such as morphine and oxycodone in locked storage. Pharmacists and nurses generally take inventory of all narcotics between shifts, he said.

People are very ingenious when it comes to stealing drugs, Capretto said. It happens more often than we're aware of. Sooner or later they get caught when they get desperate or someone notices erratic behavior.

Luis Fabregas is a staff writer for Trib Total Media. He can be reached at 412-320-7998 or lfabregas@tribweb.com