

The Vancouver Sun, Thursday, December 2, 2004, page B7

Woman's legacy lives on in care for patients

HEALTH Family turns her death into positive changes in hospitals

by Glenn Bohn

CHILLIWACK Esther Winckler's life ended in tragedy four years ago, when the 77-year-old went into Chilliwack General Hospital for routine hip surgery and died 15 days later.

She had life-threatening complications from the surgery and a serious head injury that went undiagnosed and untreated. But instead of filing a lawsuit, her family decided to advocate improvements that would help other elderly people in hospitals.

That triggered a host of patient care reforms outlined in the December edition of Nursing BC, a magazine published by the Registered Nurses Association of B.C. For example, more than 1,500 nurses in B.C. are now part of a network of nurses who have upgraded the skills they need to diagnose and care for the elderly. The patient's daughter Catherine Winckler, who created a website titled Esther's Voice to try to ensure another senior won't suffer the same fate, says the health care system has listened. "Once we took it outside a case of blame and litigation, it gave us the ability to speak and allowed people to have a dialogue," she said in an interview Tuesday.

In May 2002, the day a coroner's report documented a series of omissions and mistakes by doctors and nurses at Chilliwack General Hospital, The Vancouver Sun published a three-page story about the premature death.

Some of corner Margaret Turner's findings:

- The patient's health was unstable after her operation, but she was transferred to an "understaffed" area of the hospital instead of staying in a surgery unit where there were more nurses;
- A serious head injury believed to have been sustained in two falls from her hospital bed went undiagnosed, despite obvious signs like slurred speech, dilated pupils and bruising on one side of Winckler's head;
- The patient didn't have a bowel movement for the last 15 days of her life, although bowel function is supposed to be watched after surgeries and records are supposed to be kept.

Catherine Winckler said the first organization to respond to The Sun's story was the registered nurses association, which assured Winckler that nurses wanted to find out what went wrong.

Phyllis Hunt, a geriatric clinical specialist with the Fraser Health Authority, and colleague Marcia Carr, another specialist in the same field, began using Esther Winckler's death as a teaching tool after getting B.C. health ministry funding to conduct seminars for nurses around the province.

"I remember when the news story came out," Hunt said. "For those of us who work with older people and the challenges of caring for them when they're acutely ill, it was devastating."

There are now 11 clinical nurse specialists in B.C. 11 senior care experts who work in all five health authority regions of B.C. Three years ago, there were three clinical nurse specialists.

During education seminars around the province, nurses who care for the elderly are asked to look at the website, www.esthersvoice.com.

"It's just an amazing success and it never would have happened if it wasn't for the approach that Catherine Winckler took to this tragedy," Hunt said.

Pat Light, the health services administrator for Chilliwack health services, went so far as to suggest that Chilliwack Hospital is now a safer place for elderly people. "Esther's voice has been heard loud and clear," Light said.
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