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Iowa senator demanding answers in Pinnacle death

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September 28, 2008

By Mark Taylor Post-Tribune correspondent

A senator with a strong interest in patient-safety issues is investigating the June 12 death of a Lowell woman at a Merrillville physician-owned hospital.

U.S. Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, sent a three-page letter last week inquiring about the death of Donna Dunham to Kerry Weems, the administrator for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, the federal agency that administers Medicare.

Grassley has opposed the proliferation of limited-services physician-owned hospitals, which typically do not offer emergency or intensive care services if patients there suffer complications.

Dunham, a 78-year-old real estate agent who was the subject of an August investigative series in the Post-Tribune, died hours after back surgery performed at Pinnacle. Despite repeated warnings about her allergy to the drug, Dunham's anesthesiologist administered morphine to ease her pain. She went into respiratory arrest.

Pinnacle staff struggled to stabilize and transfer her for 21/2 hours before her transfer to The Methodist Hospitals in Merrillville, where she died one hour later of heart failure.

Grassley requested that Weems provide documentation surrounding Dunham's death, including the results of any CMS inquiry and actions the agency may have taken against Methodist or Pinnacle. He also requested copies of all complaints, surveys and findings about both hospitals by Oct. 10.

In a news release, Pinnacle Chief Executive Officer Don Burman said it's an unfortunate fact that thousands of patients die in U.S. hospitals.

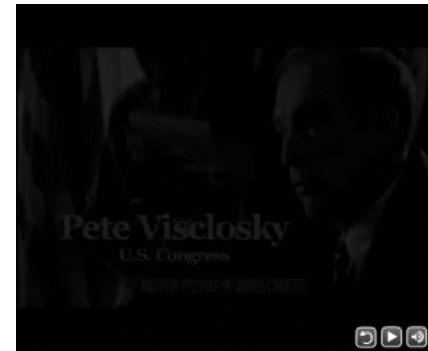
"Each death should be reviewed for its circumstances and what can be learned from that person's passing," Burman wrote. "Mrs. Dunham did not die at Pinnacle Hospital, and the facts and circumstances of Mrs. Dunham's death are still being reviewed, as they should be. We extend our sincerest sympathies and deepest condolences to Mrs. Dunham's family."

Burman said Pinnacle is cooperating with the CMS investigation and urges Grassley not to limit his investigation to Dunham's death but to comprehensively look at patient care in all hospitals across the country to ensure patient safety.

"Pinnacle remains committed to providing patient-focused care," Burman said.

The Methodist Hospitals spokeswoman, Amber Raza, said the system would not comment on the letter.

Molly Sandwig, executive director of Physician Hospitals of America, said Grassley is in a position to make a difference in the future of physician-owned hospitals, for better or worse.



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"Without opponents like Grassley, the future of physician-owned hospitals would not be in jeopardy," Sandwig said. "I think he has a great burr under his saddle for us and a real hatred of our industry."

Sandwig said her association has successfully fended off congressional attacks by Grassley and other legislators and will fight off this one.

"We have a great number of congressional allies, but the size of our megaphone is smaller than the opposition's," she said. "I don't think that this will have any more impact on the industry than any other attacks have had."

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rattus regionaris wrote:

"Pinnacle remains committed to providing patient-focused care," Burman said.

That's not exactly the whole truth. Pinnacle was formed as a physician-owned hospital because its owner-physicians didn't feel they were maximizing their income by performing their surgeries another full-service hospitals. They not only wanted the fee for surgery, but wanted to pocket the profits from the cost of the hospital room also. Its being alleged that this greed has cost a woman her life. A better, more accurate statement would have been "Pinnacle is committed to making a profit."

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