

HOSP'S BRAIN LOCK

EXCLUSIVE

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'Systemic breakdown' over failed surgery at L.I.'s North Shore: report

DOCTORS and nurses at a Long Island hospital violated 14 public health regulations in the case of a 32-year-old mom abandoned in the operating room by two no-show brain surgeons, investigators charged yesterday.

The damning state Health Department report cited Manhasset's North Shore University Hospital for failing to follow professional standards for virtually every step of Jennifer Ronca's traumatic stay on April 10.

Ronca, a Pennsylvania mother of three, came to North Shore for two procedures: one for cervical traction, which was performed; another to insert a brain shunt to relieve debilitating headaches and fatigue.

Although Ronca was placed under general anesthesia for 90 minutes for the brain shunt,

it was never inserted. Unbeknownst to Ronca, her surgeon — Dr. Paolo Bolognese — was on a plane to Florida for a family vacation.

When the OR staff and assistant medical director realized Bolognese wasn't coming, they reached out to the chief of neurosurgery, Thomas Milhorat. He refused to cover for his colleague.

Both surgeons violated professional standards and hospital policy, the report said.

Ronca was awakened and told falsely that Bolognese had a family emergency and she would have to come back another time. She never knew the truth until the Daily News exposed the incident on May 6.

"This report reveals a systemic breakdown at all levels — surgeons, nurses, anesthesiologists, OR staff," said Mark Bodner, Ronca's lawyer.

"It shows a breakdown in patient care that is astonishing in

its breadth and scope, particularly at a hospital like North Shore."

Among the 14 violations: ■ The anesthesiologist violated hospital policy and put the patient under prior to the arrival of a neurosurgeon.

■ The OR staff did not know who was operating on the patient.

■ The orthopedic surgeon who performed the first procedure left the OR once he was done. Hospital policy says in multiple procedures the first surgeon stays until the second arrives.

■ Milhorat dictated the operative report, even though he was not in the OR and did not participate in the surgery.

Milhorat, 73, and Bolognese, 49, were once the darlings of

the hospital's profitable Chiari Institute. Hospital officials suspended them on April 17 for three weeks after the incident.

Milhorat, once the highest-paid neurosurgeon in New York at \$7.2 million a year, then lost his clinical privileges and was forced to abruptly retire two days after The News' expose.

Bolognese, who is not board-certified and who earned \$2.5 million in 2007, is still operating.

Reached at her home in Pennsylvania, a stunned Ronca said: "What they did to me was deplorable and should never happen to anyone."

A spokesman for North Shore said the hospital is reviewing the report and does not agree with a number of findings. Officials

have until Oct. 2 to submit a plan of correction to the state, which can levy fines against the hospital.

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How The News covered the scandal of the brain doctors.