

Hyperkalemia vs. Hypokalemia: Nurse's Discharge Instructions Faulted, Hospital Pays Settlement.

The seventy-four year-old patient was taken to the emergency room with flu-like symptoms of fever, weakness and achiness. She also had recently fallen.

The triage nurse took her vital signs and started her on oxygen. The emergency room physician saw her and ordered x-rays and lab tests.

Everything was basically negative except for the fact that her potassium level was significantly depressed.

Nurse's Discharge Instructions Confused Hyperkalemia vs. Hypokalemia

The patient was discharged from the hospital by a registered nurse. The nurse explained the patient's diagnosis of hyperkalemia, excessive potassium.

Based on the nurse's faulty discharge instructions the patient discontinued her potassium supplements that she had been taking.

Two days later she was taken to another hospital's emergency department by ambulance by paramedics who were called when the family noticed mental status changes. Her potassium was even lower than it had been at the first hospital. She died less than two days later.

The family's wrongful death lawsuit filed in the Circuit Court, Oakland County, Michigan originally included allegations that the physicians at the first hospital failed to perform a complete physical examination to rule out pneumonia and/or a pulmonary embolism.

The allegations faulting the physicians, however, were eventually dropped, leaving only the allegation that the discharge nurse gave faulty discharge instructions based on 180° of confusion over the meaning of the patient's laboratory values. The hospital reportedly settled with the family for \$100,000, part of which went to reimburse Medicare for her last expenses. **Walrath v. Smith, 2010 WL 6662906 (Cir. Ct. Oakland Co., Michigan, July 21, 2010).**