

LEGAL EAGLE EYE NEWSLETTER

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Suicidal Patient: Court Says Nurse Should Have Recommended He Be Hospitalized.

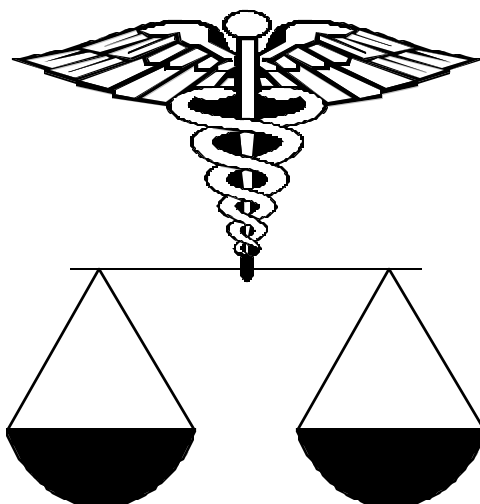
The Superior Court of New Jersey, Appellate Division, recently upheld a jury's civil wrongful death verdict of \$425,000 against a hospital and against the hospital's crisis center nurse and physician. A twenty-one year-old patient committed suicide the day after his father had taken him to the hospital because of a suicide attempt.

The son had a history of heroin abuse. He was sick in withdrawal so his father had him seen at a drug clinic. The next day after he slashed his wrist and jumped out a second-story window of their house the father phoned the drug clinic. When he mentioned the suicide attempt, the drug counselor on the phone said the drug clinic could not take the son. The drug counselor said to take him to a certain hospital's crisis center right away.

The father took the son to the emergency room at that hospital. A nurse bandaged the slashed wrist and saw them to the crisis center at the hospital. The emergency room nurse was not faulted in the lawsuit.

The crisis center nurse and physician interviewed the son. They made a quick decision and told the father the son was not suicidal but was acting out and looking for attention.

They did not offer or even recom-



The crisis center nurse was wrong telling the father his son was not suicidal but was acting out and looking for attention. He was in withdrawal, had slashed his wrist and had jumped out a window.

The nurse and physician should have recommended voluntary psychiatric hospitalization, offered it and documented the offer in the chart.

SUPERIOR COURT OF NEW JERSEY,
APPELLATE DIVISION, 1999.

mend immediate admission for voluntary psychiatric treatment. The judge and jury saw that as a critical omission. Instead, they recommended another try at outpatient drug rehab.

Early the next morning the son was missing from the home. Driving around looking for him, his father saw the flashing lights of emergency vehicles on the Interstate highway. His son had run out in front of a truck and killed himself.

At trial the court accepted testimony from psychiatric expert witnesses that the son needed close observation in a structured setting while medication was started to control his depression. A history of drug abuse, current drug withdrawal and a recent suicide attempt are three major risk factors for committing suicide, the experts agreed.

The crisis center physician testified in court they offered voluntary admission and the son declined. But in a sworn pre-trial deposition he had said he could not recall if voluntary admission was offered or even discussed with the patient. The court found nothing in the chart about hospitalization being recommended, offered or declined by the patient. ***Vasilik v. Federbush, 742 A. 2d 591 (N.J. Super., 1999).***

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