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Hospital sexual assault case goes to civil jury

Suit contends St. Joseph staff knew nurse later accused of Saddleback Memorial attack was sexual predator.

By BLYTHE BERNHARD
The Orange County Register

Gretchen Loudon was recovering from an appendectomy at Saddleback Memorial Medical Center in 2004 when she was sexually assaulted by a nurse, she told authorities.

It wasn't the first time that the nurse, Romeo Le Poblete, had been accused of sexual abuse. Two women patients at St. Joseph Hospital in Orange complained earlier that year that Poblete touched them inappropriately. Unlike Saddleback Memorial, which called the police upon learning of Loudon's complaint, St. Joseph's officials did not call authorities or otherwise disclose what they knew about Poblete.

Loudon, 58, sued both hospitals, and in March accepted an undisclosed amount in a settlement with Saddleback Memorial.

On Thursday, jurors in a Santa Ana civil court heard closing arguments from attorneys representing Loudon and St. Joseph Hospital. The jury is being asked to decide whether St. Joseph is partly responsible for Loudon's being attacked.

Attorneys for St. Joseph said hospital staff did not know Poblete had previously been accused of sexually abusing patients.

But Michael Grobaty, an attorney for Loudon, said St. Joseph staff did know about Poblete, and didn't report the reports of assaults at that hospital to preserve its reputation.

"When you have a guy that's done this twice in your hospital ... how can you possibly ship him off to another hospital without a word of warning? St. Joseph chose to protect itself instead of protecting the safety of the public."

St. Joseph attorney T. Joshua Ritz offered several possible explanations for not reporting Poblete as a sexual predator. The victims' memories in the St. Joseph's cases may have been impaired by anesthesia as they recovered from surgery; a different

nurse may have inadvertently touched their genitals while helping them dress; or hospital staff didn't believe the complaints constituted sexual abuse.

"We didn't have the benefit of what we all know now," Ritz told the jury. "It's nonsense that the hospital would knowingly harbor a molester in their ranks."

Police believe Poblete fled to the Philippines soon after the attack on Loudon. There is a \$250,000 warrant for his arrest on charges of felony sexual assault.

The reported attack at Saddleback Memorial also launched a state Board of Registered Nursing investigation into Poblete. The board revoked his license in September 2005, citing sexual abuse at Saddleback and St. Joseph.

Loudon said she wants to be sure other women know what happened to her in a local hospital.

"I thought I was safe, and I wasn't," Loudon said.