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Family wants story to be told

Woman dies, despite living only minutes away from hospital

BY JENNIFER BROWN
 Staff Writer

Bianca Acquaviva smooths the ruffles of her white lace dress. For the five-year-old Markham girl, it is a special reminder of her grandmother's skill with a needle and thread. "She was an excellent seamstress," recalled Bianca's father Sam, eldest son of Corradina Acquaviva.

The vital mother of three and grandmother died seven months ago at the age of 60, when an artery joined to her spleen ruptured.

To the shock and horror of her family, a tragic turn of events saw the 60-year-old woman become a pawn in the crisis that has become Toronto's emergency rooms.

The hospital she was taken to could not admit her. It was closed on what has become all too commonly known as CCB — critical care bypass.

Her death came as a massive shock to her family, who are still at a loss to understand why it took so long to get her to a hospital, even though she lives minutes away from Toronto East General Hospital. But on May 31, the Scarborough hospital could not accept another critically ill patient.

After six months, the family is still awaiting the coroner's report of their mother's death. Unfortunately, the family is not alone.

In early December, a Richmond Hill doctor said a Toronto patient died at York Central Hospital when a patient was redirected there in the mad crush to find open emergency rooms.

And with several other deaths across the GTA in the last month — linked to ambulances racing to find open emergency rooms — the Acquavivas are determined their mother's story will be heard.

Sam Acquaviva has been lobbying for a full coroner's inquest into his mother's death.

"I think the public should know what's happened. God forbid you should be in a position to be transferred in an ambulance right now," he said recently, recalling the hours prior to his mother's death as a recurring nightmare.

Toronto East General records show the hospital went on critical care bypass at 8:34 p.m. May 31, but the ambulance that arrived at Corradina Acquaviva's home was still instructed to go to the hospital.

It had taken the ambulance about 90 seconds to get to her home at Woodbine and Danforth avenues, arriving at about 8:04 p.m. The family felt secure their mother would receive prompt care because the ambulance station was close to her home. The paramedics were instructed to proceed to Toronto East General Hospital.

'They tried to stabilize her but she was too far gone.'

At first, paramedics tried to stabilize the woman in her home, then drove to Toronto East, arriving at 8:47 p.m. but the ER had closed down 13 minutes before — there was no room for another critically ill patient.

Paramedics were ordered to take Mrs. Acquaviva to the Wellesley Site of St. Michael's Hospital, where she died an hour later, at 9:45 p.m. that evening.

Toronto East General officials say paramedics should not have taken the critically ill woman out of the ambulance.

"We could not have possibly provided the care she required; we didn't have the equipment required," said Monique Del Medico, director of public relations at Toronto East General Hospital.

"The ambulance should not have come. It was unsafe to receive her in emergency — her care would have been compromised."

Officials have told the Acquavivas their mother's outcome would have been the same regardless, but the family refuses to believe that.

A ruptured splenic artery can cause a person to bleed to death in a number of hours if fluids are not administered as soon as possible.

Acquaviva said, ER crunch or not, hospitals should still have the ability to take patients requiring immediate attention.

"I don't know why they disembarked her," said Acquaviva, reliving the moment with horror.

"She was right in front of the doors. Once out of the ambulance and physically on the ground surely they cannot put her back in the ambulance. The ambulance driver was really peeved — he expressed his sorrow to us after. I really think they were trying to get her in there."

Acquaviva said the ambulance attendants knew his mother's blood pressure was dropping rapidly.

"They knew something was terribly wrong but they had to put her back in the ambulance and go to Wellesley. We've been told it took two minutes, but unless they took the Concord, you would never get there in two minutes. I said, 'No way, that's totally ridiculous.'"

While their mother was being transferred to the downtown Toronto hospital, her children were trying to determine what was happening.

Sam had been watching a hockey game when he received the telephone call about his mother. He and his brother arranged to meet at Toronto East General.

"We didn't even think it was serious. My mother was such a strong individual — she was healthy," he said.

But the time lost getting to Wellesley Hospital took its toll, Acquaviva believes. Doctors worked for half an hour trying to save his mother, but her heart rate was not at a level they could operate.

"They tried to stabilize her but she was too far gone," said Acquaviva.

"Blood had gone into her abdomen. If only they had stabilized her at Toronto East, she would have lived," he said.

"Time is of the essence when a person is drowning in their own blood."

By bringing their tragedy to the public eye, Acquaviva hopes others will speak out about on similar situations.

"If anything comes of my mother's death, if we can save one, or two lives — we will be happy," said Acquaviva.

"That's the reason we have to pursue it. If we are going to be mute about it, it means nothing. If it cost her life, at least let this help another person live."

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