Missing San Diego hospital patient found dead in canyon

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The body of University of California San Diego (UCSD) Medical Center patient Thomas Vera, age 57, was found in the thick brush of a canyon near the hospital, at the bottom of an eight-foot drop.

Vera had been admitted to the UCSD Medical Center in early April after suffering severe head and neck injuries following a fall down a flight of stairs. Vera's family said he was confused and delusional as a result of his injury and that doctors were waiting for his brain swelling to decrease before operating.

Vera had attempted to leave the hospital twice before and was last seen on May 27 at 6 a.m. Vera's family had joined the San Diego Police Department's search team and spent the week desperately scouring the canyon and putting up missing-persons fliers.

There seems little question but that a factor in Vera's tragic death was the understaffing of nurses at the medical center brought on by relentless budget cuts and the drive to privatization in health care.

Some of the first positions to be eliminated at UCSD were those of "sitters" tasked with monitoring patients in Vera's sort of condition. These staff have been replaced with an ineffective, cost-saving video monitoring system.

This has put patients at risk of harm, and it is likely that other similar cases remain unreported.

While Vera's family has demanded answers and an apology from the University, the only response thus far has been the medical center's claim that such an event is a "rare occurrence" that does not merit changes to hospital operations.

On May 21, one of the bargaining agents for UC Medical Workers, AFSCME, launched an impotent two-day strike at UC Medical Center to vent nurses' anger over looming cuts to health care, pensions and the impact of budget cuts on the quality of patient care.

The position of AFSCME as well as that of the California Nurses Association, which authorized a two-day strike shortly thereafter, is that adequate patient care and worker compensation can be achieved solely through reductions in the exorbitantly high compensation packages of UC Hospital Executives.

The unions resort to this diversion to cover up the role of the Democratic Party in scaling back health care and health benefits for the working class. Cuts to health programs for the poor as a result of cuts to state and municipal budgets, as well as through the Obama administration's Affordable Care Act, along with the continued deregulation of large health care providers, have led directly to tragedies such as the one that befell Thomas Vera.

WSWS reporters were contacted by two workers from the UCSD Medical Center who had feared that something like the Vera incident would occur.

Lucy works on the neurology floor with many confused patients in need of constant monitoring. According to Lucy, the hospitals' cutting of "sitters" resulted in management telling workers to tie down confused patients in the absence of personal monitoring.

Traditionally, medical staff are trained to use tie-downs as a last resort, but as the result of short staffing and cuts to funding, it has now become standard practice.

Upset over Vera's death, Lucy expressed her disgust with the University. "The hospital is collecting donations for the family, but they are the ones who should pay, they are the ones to blame," Lucy said.

Mark is a registered nurse at the UCSD Medical Center. He also contacted our reporters to inform us of Vera's death. "The staff acted appropriately per protocol, but could not get to the patient room in time

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due to lack of adequate staffing. This is exactly what I said we feared would happen with replacing sitters with video monitors to save money. Oddly enough, just three weeks ago, I attended a contract negotiation meeting for the upcoming nursing contract renewal which addressed the issue.

"A day of testimonials about the perils of replacing the sitters was met with a comment from the Chief Nursing Officer, Margarita Baggett, that she's seen no relationship that sitters decrease or prevent patient falls. There was a gasp in the audience. This is either willful avoidance of common sense for the bottom line or just stupidity on her part. Well, here's the evidence she needed."

After the incident, WSWS reporters attempted to speak with hospital workers at the UCSD Medical Center and were accosted and harassed by two security guards. The more aggressive of the two guards told the reporters, "We don't like what you're doing, you're upsetting people talking about a dead guy, you're making people nervous."

The security guard then turned to the hospital workers themselves, threatening them, "Just say no, you don't want to get in trouble with a HIPAA violation, do you?" HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) was passed in 1996 under the Clinton administration. It has been invoked in the past, often without legal grounds, precisely to preempt compromising exposures using the fig leaf of patient privacy.

Thomas Vera was a handyman who made his living doing odd jobs and his wife Sylvia is a sales associate at Walmart. His children described him as "a simple man with a sense of humor" who liked to sing.

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