

U-M cancer mix-up start of a nightmare

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Being diagnosed with breast cancer is a woman's worst nightmare.

But a bogus 2003 diagnosis resulted in a needless partial mastectomy for Theresa Karwoski after a lab technician at the University of Michigan hospital inadvertently mixed other tissue specimens with a lab patient who really did have cancer.

Karwoski, 50, of Ann Arbor said the resulting surgery — which included the removal of

lymph nodes — left her with a condition known as lymphedema, an abnormal swelling caused by the impaired flow of lymphatic fluid.

She said the condition caused her to miss work, resulting in the final trauma of being fired from her job as a nurse at the same hospital where the surgery was performed.

"What happened to me at the University of Michigan Hospital has been devastating to me and my family and cor-

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tinues to affect all aspects of my life," Karwoski said through her attorney on Wednesday, weeks after a Washenaw County Circuit Court judge and jury awarded her \$3 million in damages.

On Friday, the university asked Circuit Judge Thomas Connors to throw out the verdicts or order a new trial saying the evidence didn't support the verdicts. A hearing is set for May 25.

Karwoski, who now works part-time as an environmental researcher, said she would spend the rest of her life dealing with the physical problems resulting from the error.

A U-M spokeswoman said the health service feels terrible about the mistake.

"From the beginning, we acknowledged our error, apologized sincerely for it and made meaningful attempts to fairly compensate her without going to litigation," spokeswoman Kallie

Michels said Wednesday. "Unfortunately, we weren't able to come to an agreement with her."

Karwoski's lawyer, Michael Garris of Ann Arbor, said the university offered her a \$500,000 settlement before trial.

He and his cocounsel, Kitty Groh, said the laboratory glitch was just the beginning of Karwoski's ordeal.

The surgeon told Karwoski after surgery that he had to remove more lymph nodes than planned because the cancer had spread. He also told Karwoski and her husband that her prognosis was poor.

Garris said Karwoski started to realize something was amiss when she got back to work, logged onto the health system's computer, looked at her records and discovered that the tissue removed from her body had tested negative for cancer.

When Karwoski began pressing for answers, Garris said the director of a lab at the hospital did some investigating, discov-

ered the labeling mix-up in the lab, and told Karwoski she should not have undergone surgery. The director also told her she should forget about what had happened.

"The message in this case that medical errors do happen a health care system but patients have to exercise caution, ask questions, obtain second opinions where appropriate to make sure they're receiving the proper medical care," Garris said.

Michels said Karwoski was terminated because she didn't provide a letter from her doctor to continue her medical leave. Garris said she doesn't want her firing from her work record.

Michels also said the university has since taken steps to prevent the problem from happening again and that the lab technician was reassigned at her own request.

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