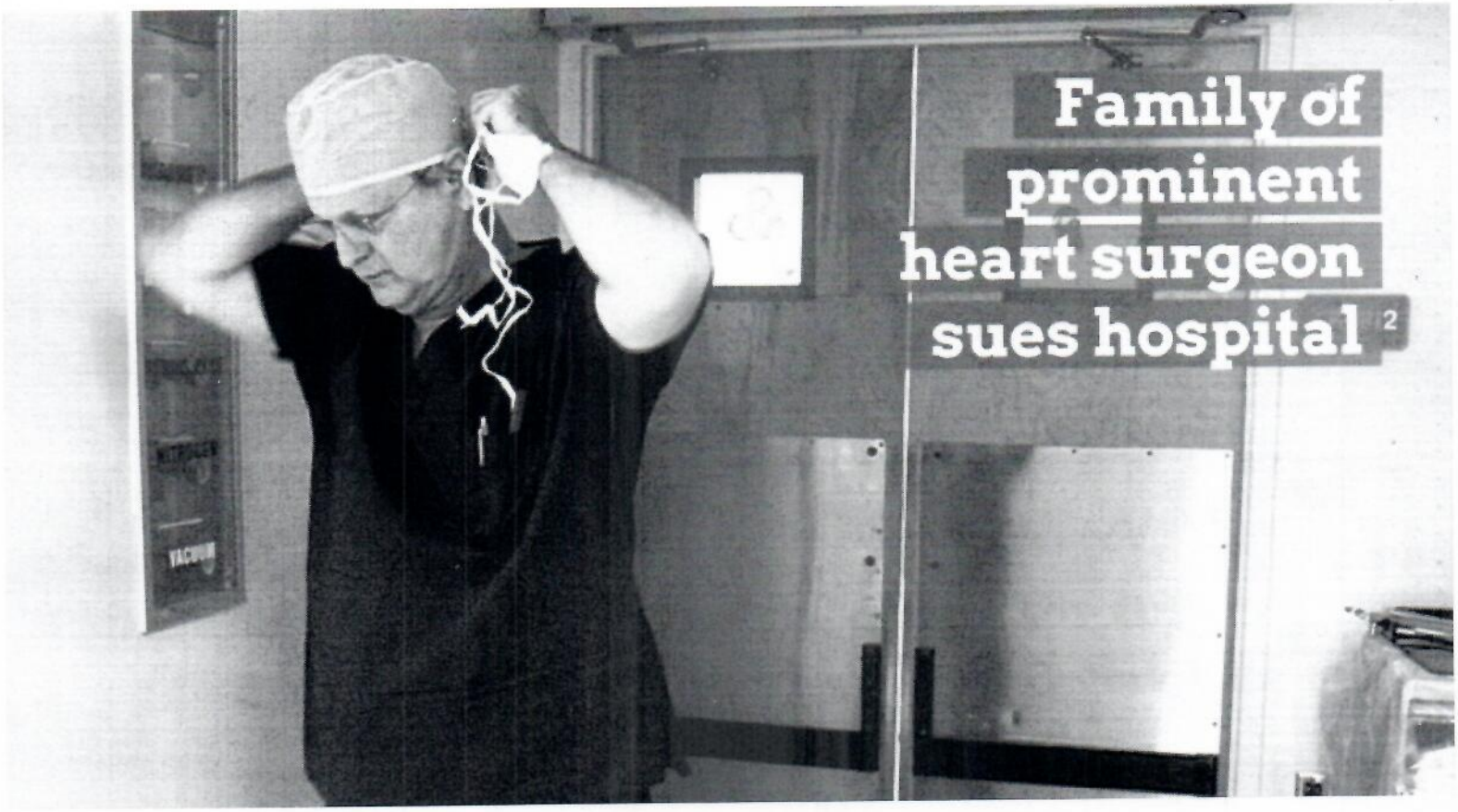

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Prominent JFK heart surgeon fights for life as family sues hospital

By Jane Musgrave
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The prominent heart surgeon was left in a vegetative state following back surgery in May.

WEST PALM BEACH — Spending more than 30 years hovering over patients for hours at JFK Medical Center as he meticulously repaired their broken hearts, prominent Palm Beach County cardiac surgeon Dr. J. Lancelot Lester developed back problems.

Anxious to get back into the operating room, he scheduled his third back surgery for May, expecting it would be routine.

It wasn't.

"Dad is coding," Lindsay Stortz said Tuesday, remembering the alarming text she got from her sister a day after their father's surgery at the same hospital he helped put on the map by establishing its nationally recognized heart program.

While Lester survived the back surgery, the 74-year-old former chief of JFK's cardiovascular surgery was left in a vegetative state after he had a violent reaction to a powerful narcotic he was prescribed to alleviate his pain.

On Tuesday, Stortz and her sisters filed suit in Palm Beach County Circuit Court against their father's former employer, claiming a series of medical mistakes led to his near-demise. Attorney David Spicer, who is representing Lester's three daughters, said he will seek between $15 million and $20 million.

"Thank god he lived. Thank god he's with us," said Stortz, who as her father's court-appointed guardian is leading the legal fight. "Now we have to focus on his care and on making sure it doesn't happen to anyone else."

Stortz said she and her sisters were forced to file suit after the hospital refused to help them get their father the care he desperately needs. "They haven't offered us anything," she said, "not even an apology."

Further, she said, they didn't report what was clearly a medical accident to the Florida Department of Health. The report would have spurred a review that could have prevented a similar outcome for other patients.

"Any person who reviews the charts can see it went horribly wrong," said Stortz, a nurse who lives in Durham, N.C.

In a statement, JFK officials denied the allegations. "Dr. Lester was a longtime and valued member of the JFK Medical Center family, and this is a tragic situation for all of us who have known him and worked with him for many years," it said. "While our hearts go out to his family, friends and colleagues, we disagree with allegations in the suit and we will present our side through the legal process."

Stortz said her father's back surgery went well. But, a day later, Lester was in excruciating pain, she said. Even though his charts warned that Lester was "opioid naïve," meaning he had a low tolerance for narcotics, Dr. Eduardo Jusino ordered that Lester be given a high dose of the powerful painkiller Dilaudid, according to the lawsuit Spicer filed against both JFK and Jusino.

Minutes after the Dilaudid was pumped into Lester intravenously, the physician went into respiratory failure. Doctors waited more than 15 minutes before giving Lester what could have been a life-changing dose of Narcan to reverse the effects of Dilaudid, which is eight times more potent than morphine, the lawsuit says.

By the time the Narcan was administered, Lester's respiratory collapse had caused a cascade of ills, including cardiac arrest and brain injury that left him in a coma.

After spending more than a month at a hospital in Miami, Lester was moved to Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital near Boston. Within weeks, he is to be moved to TIRR Memorial Hermann, a hospital in Houston that has a cutting-edge brain injury treatment program, Stortz said.

While Lester can't walk or talk, he is breathing on his own. Further, she said, he responds to his children's voices. "He's made progress, just not as fast as we would have hoped," she said.

But, the treatment is expensive and much of it isn't covered by Medicare, she said. Already, she and her sisters have sold all but three of the 19 horses their outdoors-loving father kept at a small ranch in Okeechobee.

More family items will have to be sold if JFK doesn't agree to help the doctor who worked at the hospital since 1987, Spicer said.

"The sad thing is he knew all the top people at the University of Miami," Spicer said. But, when he needed medical help he didn't turn to them. "He felt strongly about having the surgery at JFK. He viewed it as 'my hospital,' " he said.

Performing as many as 380 open heart surgeries a year, Lester was beloved by his patients although he was often at odds with hospital administrators.

He was suspended by JFK for what it called "quality of care" issues in 2003. Lester, known to treat high-risk patients, balked at hospital claims that his mortality rates were too high. His patients were inflamed by the suspension. Ultimately, a hospital committee agreed that Lester's mortality rates were "acceptable" and he was reinstated.

"This has been a difficult and dark period for me," Lester told The Palm Beach Post shortly after JFK rescinded its decision. "My ability to help patients and the affection that they returned was the fuel of my life."

In 2005, he sued the hospital, claiming it conspired to ruin his medical practice and defame him. The suit was settled for undisclosed terms.

Lester loved his job and in his early days slept on the floor in the intensive care unit in case his patients needed him, Stortz said. But, he also loved life, she said. He fished. He hunted. He rode horses. In his 60s, he took up kite-boarding.

"He was a force of nature," Spicer said. "He was a larger than life kind of guy."

Still, he said, if he dies, JFK and its owner, Nashville-based HCA, will be off the hook. Since Lester was divorced, he doesn't have a spouse who could sue for the loss. Florida law prohibits adult children from filing suit to recover money if their parents die due to medical malpractice.

"The suit would die with him," Spicer said.

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