

# CASE STUDY 2.5

## WHEN PATIENT SAFETY IS CALLED INTO QUESTION

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On November 16, 2001, St. Cloud Hospital conducted a press conference to announce that it was working with the Minnesota Department of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to determine the cause of two patient deaths following knee surgery.

The press conference resulted in coverage on all of the Minneapolis/St. Paul network television affiliates (most including reporter stand-ups in front of the hospital), the front page of St. Cloud's daily newspaper and the metro dailies. Subsequent media attention came from across the United States.

The next day, a patient in another Minnesota community died following knee surgery there.

On November 18, the Minnesota Department of Health issued a directive to suspend all elective knee surgery at hospitals throughout the state after three patients died unexpectedly following knee surgery. Two of those patients had been operated on at St. Cloud Hospital.

St. Cloud decided to go beyond the scope of the health department mandate and suspend all elective orthopedic surgeries, not just knee surgeries. On November 18, the hospital issued a press release that included a statement by St. Cloud president John Frobenius: "We are suspending all elective orthopedic surgeries even though detailed reviews of St. Cloud Hospital's operating rooms and patient care practices have not turned up any factors that could have caused these deaths. We believe our decision is in the best interest of the patients, for their safety and peace of mind." Also included in the press release was information about other steps being taken by the hospital. All patients who had undergone knee surgery in the past two weeks would receive a call from the medical group to provide information, inquire about their condition and answer questions. In addition, a letter would be distributed to all patients and their families explaining the situation and stating that the hospital was cooperating fully with the state health department and the CDC in their investigations.

When an exhaustive investigation by the health department subsequently failed to disclose any links among the three deaths, the knee surgery moratorium was lifted. On November 23, the hospital issued another press release. This follow-up press release featured a prominent quote from an epidemiologist at the Minnesota Department of Health: "St. Cloud Hospital has cooperated with us fully on this investigation, and they have been under very intense scrutiny over the last several days. People who are scheduled to have surgery at this facility can proceed with total confidence in their safety." The release also described other steps the hospital had taken to ensure patients' safety and concluded with a quote from Dr. Daniel

Whitlock, St. Cloud's vice president for medical affairs: "Our deepest sympathy is extended to the families of all three patients. While we continue to follow up on various details of the three cases, our medical leadership believes that it is safe to continue to proceed. The health department has come to a similar conclusion." (At press time, both releases were available online at the St. Cloud Hospital website, [www.centracare.com](http://www.centracare.com).)

## LESSONS LEARNED

St. Cloud, faced with a difficult situation that demanded an immediate reaction, exemplified the guidelines for handling such situations:

- The hospital developed a plan of action and conducted a press conference, followed by press releases as new developments occurred.
- In suspending all orthopedic surgeries rather than just knee surgery, the hospital went beyond what was required to demonstrate its commitment to patient safety.
- The initial press release included a statement from the hospital CEO that emphasized his concern for patients' safety and peace of mind. The statement referred to the favorable results of the hospital's internal review but did not go beyond the scope of what was known at that time.
- A multifaceted communications campaign, including telephone calls to knee surgery patients and letters to all current patients, was launched immediately.
- When the state investigation did not turn up a common source of infection, the follow-up press release quoted a third-party expert—a health department epidemiologist involved in the investigation—to deliver the good news, thereby enhancing credibility.

"We were able to develop and execute an effective communications plan in this tragic situation because of three key factors," said Jeanine Nistler, St. Cloud's director of communications. "The hospital president championed the position that we should be open with the public; the administrative and clinical staffs brought communications into the loop immediately; and we had a well-established, positive relationship with those staffs which allowed us to be trusted and relied upon in this crisis."