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From the Los Angeles Times

Deaths, rape lead to scrutiny of Pasadena psychiatric hospital

Aurora Las Encinas Hospital in Pasadena, a favored destination for celebrities in need of rehab, is faulted by state officials for two deaths in April.

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Three adult patients died unexpectedly and a teenage patient was raped after entering a Pasadena psychiatric hospital known for its association with celebrity physician Drew Pinsky, records show.

The incidents occurred in the last five months at Aurora Las Encinas Hospital, which advertises itself as a "world-renowned" haven where patients with acute mental illness and substance abuse problems can recover in safety and comfort. It is a favored destination for rock musicians and actors, among others.

Pinsky, who co-hosts the syndicated radio show "Loveline" and anchors the VH1 reality TV series "Celebrity Rehab With Dr. Drew," is co-medical director of the chemical dependency department and is prominently featured on the hospital's website. He has said he played no direct role in any of the patients' care.

Experts say it is rare to see so many patients at a psychiatric hospital die or be harmed in such a short period. State health inspectors have investigated and faulted the hospital's care in the first two deaths, which occurred within two days in April.

The patients, who were being treated for drug abuse in the chemical dependency unit, both died of apparent drug overdoses, according to coroner's records and the report by inspectors for the state Department of Public Health.

This month, a patient in the NASH House, which treats substance abusers on the hospital grounds, hanged himself from a wooden beam, the Los Angeles County coroner found.

One day after his body was found a 14-year-old girl was raped by a 16-year-old patient as hospital staffers and the suspect's probation officer slept nearby, according to two sources familiar with the matter. "Not a very good track record, especially at an expensive hospital like that," said Taras Otus, the brother of Timur Otus, the 43-year-old bipolar patient who hanged himself. "I don't understand what's going on there exactly."

The hospital declined to comment on the incidents, citing patient confidentiality.

Pinsky issued a written statement: "I had no direct knowledge and no direct participation in the recent care of the patients in question. Patient confidentiality laws prevent me from discussing these or any other patients who may have been admitted to the facility."

Run by Aurora Behavioral Health Care, the hospital advertises on its website such amenities as a tennis court, swimming pool and manicured garden. Shared rooms cost \$840 a night, while private rooms are \$1,400 a night. It recently created a deluxe treatment center, offering concierge service, a "personal healthcare attendant" and access to a flat-screen high-definition TV.

In January, the cable network VH1 began airing the first season of a reality show featuring Pinsky and two other Las Encinas employees, which is filmed at Pasadena Recovery Center not far from the hospital.

According to the VH1 website, the show "chronicles the dramatic, unscripted real life experiences of a group of celebrities as they make the life-changing decision to enter a treatment program."

Las Encinas' recent troubles began when Jeffrey Hearn, 28, who was admitted for drug addiction in March, was found unresponsive after 7 a.m. April 11, records show. He was transferred to Huntington Hospital in Pasadena, where he died a day later, according to the coroner's office.

The state investigation, quoting police and hospital staff, found that another patient had "somehow supplied or facilitated contraband prescription medications, Soma and Norco . . . resulting in a medication overdose."

The alleged supplier of the painkillers was a former pharmaceutical representative who knew how to obtain medications, according to the state report.

The day after Hearn died, 23-year-old Alex Clyburn, was admitted to Las Encinas for drug addiction. Clyburn, who was a student at Cal State Northridge, had taken a large dose of OxyContin, a painkiller, and Xanax, an anti-anxiety medication, just before his family brought him in, according to the state and coroner's reports.

The hospital gave him several medications, including those intended to relax muscles, relieve pain, decrease heart rate and lower anxiety, the coroner's office wrote.

Clyburn's mother, Arline, a nurse, was concerned about the mix of prescriptions because of the possibility it would cause respiratory distress, said Sean Burke, a lawyer for Clyburn's parents.

A hospital nurse assured his mother that "they would check on Alex through the course of the night," Burke said. A mental health worker was ordered to check on him every 15 minutes, the state report said.

According to the coroner's report, Clyburn appeared "heavily intoxicated" to other patients and they observed him "staggering to his room."

The next morning, April 14, Clyburn was found dead.. According to the coroner's report, his body was lying face up on a hardwood floor, with vomit trailing from his mouth.

The coroner's report said his death was caused by an overdose of multiple drugs.

According to a state report, a mental health worker did not conduct the 15-minute checks and falsified the patient's record to suggest otherwise. Although the worker wrote that Clyburn was sleeping at 7:15 a.m., a nurse reported at 7:20 a.m. that Clyburn was "unarousable, cold & stiff to touch with a blue face," suggesting that he had been dead for some time.

In a plan submitted to the state on the April deaths, Las Encinas said it fired the mental health worker involved.

The hospital also issued new rules to enhance monitoring of patients and visitors. For example, it mandated frequent checks of routine vital signs and searches of visitors' bags. Las Encinas has had similar problems in the past, state records show. In October 2004, an 18-year-old patient died after being placed in leg restraints for two days, instead of 3 1/2 hours as ordered. Two weeks later, a patient was found dead after drowning himself in a bathtub. The incidents caused the federal government to threaten to pull funding, but the issues were deemed resolved.

The most recent events have already affected the hospital's relationship with an insurer. The mental health subsidiary of UnitedHealth Group, the nation's second largest health insurer, has suspended referrals there until it completes its own probe, said spokesman Brad Lotterman.

Some family members remain distraught and outraged.

Taras Otus said the hospital has not followed up with his family since they were informed of his brother's death. He described Otus as a gregarious struggling actor who worked as an extra and on the set of the television show "Ripley's Believe It or Not." Among his possessions was a note from host Dean Cain, thanking him for ensuring Cain was well-lighted during filming.

Otus, a UCLA graduate, had his first manic episode about seven or eight years ago, his brother said. He was stable for a while, but last summer he started to use Ecstasy and crack, then became suicidal.

At the hospital he had been in a unit where he was on suicide watch, then was transferred into a unit that treats substance abuse, the brother said.

On July 31, the hospital called the family, saying Otus was missing, the brother said. The next morning, hospital employees found his body hanging from the beam of a dilapidated shed on the hospital campus, the brother said.

Otus hanged himself using a white plastic bag, a coroner's report said.

The shed "really should've been torn down 50 years ago," Taras Otus said.

"You'd think there is some kind of moral responsibility to call the family, reach out and say, 'I'm sorry.' But apparently they don't do that at this hospital," the brother said. "They gave us two garbage bags of his stuff, which I guess is what happens."

The parents of Alex Clyburn say they are pursuing legal action.

As a teenager, Clyburn was an Eagle Scout and two-time pitcher of the year at Thousand Oaks High School.

He was recruited to play baseball at Chapman University in Orange County and later transferred to Cal State Northridge, where he studied communications.

In 2006, after Clyburn suffered painful injuries in an auto accident, he became addicted to the painkiller OxyContin, said Burke, the Clyburns' lawyer.

"He was already in rigor mortis when he was found," Burke said. "He had gone for several hours without being checked . . . so it looks like they certainly weren't doing what they said they were going to do."

Contacted last week, Greg Hearn, the father of Jeffrey Hearn, said he had seen no reason to fault the hospital's care. He knew Dr. Pinsky, and had given the hospital a donation "because they took care of my son."

Then he learned from a reporter about the inspection report stating that another patient apparently gave his son the drugs on which he overdosed.

"Wow. I didn't know. It's stuff I didn't know. . . ."

"It's so sad . . . I lost my only son."

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Times researcher Vicki Gallay contributed to this report.

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