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Hospital settles with 26 women who filed sex assault complaints

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Curtis Rush
 Staff Reporter

A Toronto hospital has settled with 26 women who claim one of its anesthesiologists sexually assaulted them, in a confidential deal the lawyer for the accused calls a "rush to judgment."

The settlement in the civil matter was reached by North York General Hospital on March 8, despite the fact that Dr. George Doodnaught, 62, has yet to stand trial on 29 charges of sexual assault.

Darcy Merkur, a lawyer who represents 26 of the 29 complainants, said details of the settlement are confidential.

Merkur would only say the agreement resolves claims against the hospital "in a manner that is fair, efficient, sensitive and respectful to its patients."

According to a statement by Merkur's Toronto law firm, Thomson, Rogers, the agreement



George Doodnaught has been charged with 29 counts of sexual assault.

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was without an admission of liability on the part of the hospital, "but represents the hospital's willingness to move forward."

Doodnaught was charged last March with three counts of sexual assault after female patients complained of incidents while they were under anesthetic.

At the time, police asked other potential victims to step forward.

On Sept. 30, police laid another 26 charges relating to alleged incidents, the majority of them at North York General Hospital, where Doodnaught worked for 28 years.

He is no longer associated with the hospital.

Doodnaught's lawyer, Brian Greenspan, called the hospital's actions "reprehensible" and a "rush to judgment."

Greenspan said his client was a "distinguished physician" at the hospital who had "an impeccable reputation."

"For many of the surgeons at the hospital, he was the anesthetist of choice," Greenspan said.

"When he is exonerated, we hope that employers and hospitals will not take the easy route and try to simply close the chapter on their position by abandoning people who have been loyal to them and who have conducted themselves honorably."

In seeking closure, the hospital "abandoned any sense of fairness to Dr. Doodnaught," the lawyer charged.

In a statement Thursday, the hospital's interim president and CEO, Dr. Tim Rutledge, said the hospital, in reaching the settlement, was intent on "resolving the claims in an equitable manner that avoided a lengthy legal process for its patients. This represented our willingness to move forward with the claims in a manner that was respectful and sensitive to our patients."

He said the hospital can't comment on any specifics due to the confidentiality of the settlement and the criminal process.

Greenspan said the civil settlement has no impact on the criminal proceedings.

Earlier this year, bail restrictions against Doodnaught were eased, allowing him to perform medical procedures in clinics as long as he interacts only with male patients under the direct supervision of a doctor.

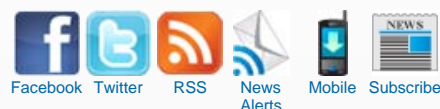
Those bail conditions have become practice restrictions on his licence as well, said Kathryn Clarke, spokeswoman for the Ontario College of Physicians and Surgeons.

Meanwhile, the college has confirmed Doodnaught is not currently working at a clinic or hospital in Ontario.

The college says it is still investigating the matter and is not at the stage where it has grounds to impose further restrictions.

"We cannot impose restrictions on somebody's practice unless we have completed the investigation and we have evidence to suggest grounds to make a referral to the disciplinary committee, or we have grounds to believe the patients are at risk," Clarke said.

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