

Inmate claims jail neglect sent him into diabetic coma

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Staff ignored pleas for insulin, lawyer says in latest incident

For the second time in a month, officials with the Metro Health Department and the sheriff's office were forced to answer questions yesterday about whether inmates are receiving appropriate medical care in the Metro Jail.

Paul E. Burton III, 40, was hospitalized Jan. 11 in a diabetic coma after he requested higher doses of insulin than jail staff would provide, his Nashville attorney David Raybin said.

Eight days later, another inmate with diabetes, Ricky Douglas, was found dead four hours after telling a deputy that he had not received his scheduled medication. His death remains under investigation.

Raybin said the two situations together raise questions about whether prisoners are receiving adequate medical care from Prison Health Services, the private, Brentwood-based firm that contracts to provide health care to inmates.

"I don't see this is just a weird coincidence," Raybin said. "I see this is a pattern based on other information I'm seeing."

The diabetic coma left Burton with diminished eyesight, the lawyer said. Raybin also said he is coordinating with other attorneys with clients who also claim to have received poor medical care in the Metro Jail.

The Davidson County Sheriff's Office denied any pattern of shoddy health care.

"I don't think the picture can be painted that this is a pattern of problems," sheriff's spokeswoman Karla Crocker said.

She referred specific questions about the cases to health officials.

Ben Purser, ethics and compliance officer for Prison Health Services, said the company conducted an internal investigation into both incidents and believes its employees did nothing wrong.

"The personnel at the Davidson County jail provided timely, effective and appropriate care," in both Burton's and Douglas' cases, Purser said.

He also declined to discuss specific cases.

Medical care at the 690-prisoner Metro lockup came under scrutiny last week when officials disclosed details surrounding the death of Douglas, 39.

In that case, a deputy conducting a routine head count was told by Douglas and other inmates that a nurse had failed to provide them with scheduled medication. The prisoners also asked for blankets.

The deputy apparently continued his count without providing blankets or summoning the nurse, according to a report filed by the officer.

The sheriff's office and Metro Health Department officials have declined to disclose whether a nurse did provide the medication or whether jail policies were followed.

Douglas, who had been jailed on charges of arson and assault, was found dead in his cell before dawn Jan. 19. In addition to diabetes, Douglas also had cerebral palsy.

The cause of his death remains under investigation.

Burton, of Madison, was jailed Jan. 9 for domestic violence and resisting arrest.

According to his lawyer, Burton had a doctor's prescription that he take 50 units of insulin twice a day. But when he was admitted to the jail, medical staff gave him just four units, Raybin said.

He pleaded with jail staff for a higher dose, to no avail, Raybin said.

He complained to relatives that his arms were numb, he had severe stomach pain and was vomiting violently, said his sister, Jennifer Economy.

She said she became particularly concerned for her brother after learning of Douglas' death last week.

"I was just thinking that we could be the Douglas family right now," Economy said. "We came very close to it."

Prison Health Services is paid \$3.5 million annually by the city to provide health care to most of Nashville's inmates. The company's five-year contract ends June 30, and Metro will accept new bids this year, Health Department officials said.