

My name is Charlene DeFico. On December 27, 2021, my mother, Inez DeFico, and my stepfather, Butch Moring, entered Virtua Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Camden, New Jersey. Both were hearing-impaired and experiencing altered mental status. I went there to advocate for them. I was my stepfather's Medical Power of Attorney. Instead, I was escorted from the emergency department and denied access.

Nine days later, my stepfather was dead. My mother remained hospitalized for 21 more days. Much of what happened to them I discovered only later through thousands of pages of medical records and a three-minute voicemail from my mother begging for help.

My stepfather was placed on a ventilator the day he entered the hospital. I was told it was his only chance, and so I agreed. His records later showed Remdesivir, Baricitinib, fentanyl, midazolam, propofol, Precedex, rocuronium, and other treatments given without informed consent from me. They also showed restraints, multiple wounds, and repeated findings that he was unarousable and unresponsive. One sedation assessment stated, "unacceptable: patient unresponsive." Antibiotics for his infection were not started until the day he died.

Three days after admission, I finally reached my mother. She was 74, hearing-impaired, confused, dehydrated, crying and asking for water, although there was no fluid restriction. Her records later showed her urinary tract infection was not treated with antibiotics until 17 days after admission.

On January 1, my mother was restrained for over 11 hours. While restrained, with her lips documented as "bluish pale," she was given 1 mg of Ativan. As her oxygen remained low, staff repeatedly increased it. Hours later, a physical therapist discovered her oxygen was disconnected from the wall.

I later discovered a three-minute voicemail recorded during those hours. My mother was begging for water and pleading with a physician for help. She said the nurse was "torturing" her, asked for another nurse, and said her communication devices had been taken away. Then she said:

"They won't let me talk to my daughter."

I was that daughter, and I was being kept from her bedside.

On January 4, my phone rang. My stepfather was in cardiac arrest. The physician kept me on the phone, counting the two-minute CPR intervals out loud. After seven minutes, his heart restarted.

Minutes later, the physician called again. He was in cardiac arrest a second time. Again, I listened to the CPR countdown until his heart restarted after four minutes.

The third call was about a DNR. When I hesitated, the physician said, "We probably broke all his ribs." I consented to the DNR.

My stepfather died shortly afterward.

Alone.

My mother was still inside.

After his death, I asked to be with her when she was told. The hospital still denied me access. Records documented an ethics review over whether staff should tell her without me.

I hired an attorney and was finally permitted one visit. I found her hospital phone in the closet, her call button beyond her reach, and water where my bedridden mother could not reach it.

After 30 days, my mother came home unable to walk, speak clearly, eat, drink, or use the bathroom independently, with pressure injuries and a deep tissue injury.

Much of what happened to my parents I learned only afterward.

What would have been different if I had been allowed through those doors to advocate for them?

I ask this Committee to investigate what happened when hospitals denied families and advocates access, failed to obtain informed consent, and left vulnerable patients without the people they trusted to speak for them.

My stepfather died alone. My mother barely survived.

No patient should ever be left without an advocate.

Charlene DeFico