

Former Ga. Technician Falsified Mammogram Reports

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By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press



Sharon Holmes found a lump in her left breast quite by accident. At work one day as a high school custodian, her hand brushed up against her chest and she felt a knot sticking out. She was perplexed. After all, just three months earlier, she had been given an all-clear sign from her doctor after a

mammogram.

A new mammogram in February 2010 showed she in fact had an aggressive stage 2 breast cancer. The horror of the discovery was compounded by the reason: The earlier test results she had gotten weren't just read incorrectly. They were falsified.

She wasn't alone in facing this news. The lead radiological technologist at Perry Hospital in Perry, a small community about 100 miles south of Atlanta, had for about 18 months been signing off on mammograms and spitting out reports showing nearly 1,300 women were clear of any signs of breast cancer or abnormalities.

Except that she was wrong. Holmes and nine other women were later shown to have lumps or cancerous tumors growing inside them.

Holmes said the discovery was horrific enough. With a son in his 20s and another in high school at the time, she trembled at the thought of leaving them without a mother. "To me, that meant a death sentence," she said. She underwent successful surgery the month after the cancer was discovered to remove the lump from her breast and followed that with chemotherapy and radiation treatments.

Her breast has been cancer-free for four years and subsequent cancers found elsewhere, in her lymph nodes and thyroid, have been successfully treated. Now she just prays it doesn't come back.

But to find out later that she had been deceived made it even worse. "I'm thinking I'm doing what I'm supposed to do, getting my tests done, and then I find out someone else isn't doing their job," Holmes told The Associated Press.

The tech, Rachael Rapraeger, pleaded guilty earlier this month to 10 misdemeanor charges of reckless conduct and one felony charge of computer forgery. She was sentenced to serve up to six months in a detention center, to serve 10 years on probation during which she can't work in the health care field and to pay a \$12,500 fine.

The reasons she gave were vague. She told police she had personal issues that caused her to stop caring about her job, that she had fallen behind processing the piles of mammogram films that stacked up. So she went into the hospital's computer system, assumed the identities of physicians, and gave each patient a clear reading, an investigative report says. That allowed her to avoid the time-consuming paperwork required before the films are brought to a reading room for radiologists to examine, her lawyer Floyd Buford told the AP.

Her actions were uncovered in April 2010 after a patient who'd received a negative report had another mammogram three months later at another hospital that revealed she had breast cancer. As hospital staff began to investigate, it was determined that the doctor whose name was on the faulty report had not been at the hospital the day the report was filed. Rapraeger quickly confessed to her supervisor that she was responsible and was fired from her job about a week later, according to an investigator's report.

Rapraeger told police she knew what she was doing wasn't right, but that she didn't consider the consequences until she realized a patient with cancer had been told her scan was clear.



She didn't return a phone call from The Associated Press seeking comment. Her attorney said she feels great remorse about any pain that she caused.

Cary Martin, CEO of Houston Healthcare, which operates Perry Hospital, released a statement saying he is "pleased this component of Ms. Rapraeger's unfortunate action is concluded" and declined to comment further.

Sara Bailey also received a false-negative report. By the time it was discovered, her breast cancer progressed to the point that doctors had to remove her entire breast rather than just going in and removing a lump, she said.

The surgery was successful and the cancer hasn't returned, but Bailey carries a bitterness inside her that surfaces when she talks about her experience.

"I'm not hurting and I don't think I have cancer, but I'm not a woman anymore," the 80-year-old said, her eyes welling with tears and her voice catching as she talked about the loss of her breast.

The emotional wound was opened again this month when Rapraeger received a sentence that Bailey saw as a slap on the wrist.

"I feel like we were thrown under the bus, and there will be an election day," Bailey said, explaining that she plans to organize an effort to get Houston Judicial Circuit District Attorney George Hartwig voted out of office.

Hartwig said he understands how Bailey feels and knows some people think Rapraeger got off easy, but he said his office weighed the evidence in the case very carefully and concluded the plea was a fair outcome. Even though Rapraeger did make statements and admissions to police, they were too general to prove specific instances of wrongdoing, he said.

"Given the entirety of the case and the issues that were there, I really feel like we did the best we could do to get a measure of justice for these women," he said, adding that it would have been even more disappointing if the case had gone to trial and she'd been found not guilty and walked out of there with no penalty.

For her part, Holmes, 49, has tried to move on, and testifying at Rapraeger's sentencing helped with that.

"I wanted her to know I'm a person, not just a name on a paper," she said.

But she's still angry because lingering effects from her chemotherapy and radiation — treatments she said her doctors told her might not have been necessary if the cancer had been caught by the original mammogram — have kept her from returning to work as a high school janitor.

Like Bailey, she thought Rapraeger's sentence was too light, and she was disappointed that Rapraeger didn't speak in court, instead letting her attorney read a statement for her.

"If she had gotten up and at least said, 'I'm sorry for what I did. I'm sorry these women had to go through this,' that, to me, would have meant that she was truly sorry for what we went through," Holmes said.

Mary Brown had a mammogram in August 2009. She was contacted by the hospital in May 2010 and told to come back for another. That one came back positive, and she had a mastectomy to remove her right breast. She considers herself lucky that she apparently had a slow-growing cancer and didn't need to have chemotherapy or radiation.

Brown, a 78-year-old Jehovah's Witness, credits her strong faith in God with helping her get through the ordeal and with helping her forgive Rapraeger.

"I don't have any hard feelings about her. Whatever she did, she brought it on herself," Brown said, though she conceded her relative good fortune might also be coloring her reaction. "Maybe if I had been dying sick from it I would feel different."