

Feb. 14, 2023

To the judges:

After five hours of CPR, a 2-year-old girl died on the operating table at John Muir Medical Center. Ailee Jong's parents walked out of the Northern California hospital that night in 2019, pushing her empty stroller, devastated and wondering what went wrong.

Two years later, Chronicle reporters Matthias Gafni and Cynthia Dizikes found the answer: John Muir had performed Ailee's liver resection — its first ever attempt at the complicated procedure — despite warnings from staff members that the Walnut Creek community hospital was not capable of such an operation and that, if they proceeded, Ailee would die. After poring through more than 2,500 pages of medical records, speaking to top medical experts and cultivating inside sources, the reporters learned that John Muir doctors had botched the surgery that cost Ailee her young life.

Gafni and Dizikes would soon find that she wasn't the only one.

Over the course of a year-long investigation, the reporters uncovered the preventable deaths of at least four children who were treated in the hospital's pediatric intensive care unit, or PICU. More than a dozen medical experts around the country said the fatalities appeared to speak to John Muir's inexperience treating exceptionally sick children. In each case, The Chronicle found a pattern of questionable care, including multiple failed intubations — the bread and butter of a PICU.

Each family had been drawn to John Muir by a promise: Stanford-level care. In 2014, Stanford Medicine Children's Health had announced a new partnership with John Muir, pledging to provide the nation's best treatment to acutely sick children closer to their homes in the East Bay of San Francisco. Such alliances have become more common in recent years as brand-name medical institutions around the country have sought to expand their reach.

However, these arrangements too often provide little to no transparency about patient care, especially at private hospitals, where confidential internal review processes can shroud problems. Indeed, in the four cases examined by The Chronicle, neither John Muir nor Stanford ever told the parents about the errors that preceded their children's deaths.

But by obtaining and analyzing obscure state datasets, combing through California's death rolls and county death certificates and speaking to dozens of sources, Dizikes and Gafni found the families of the children, enabling experts to review their medical records.

Gafni had first started looking into allegations of pediatric malpractice at John Muir in January, when a longtime source led him to Dr. Alicia Kalamas. The former John Muir medical director argued she had been fired for raising alarms about patient care, and that hospital leaders dismissed her warnings about a young girl's surgery. Intrigued by the death, Gafni worked his sources to find Ailee — and a host of other concerns at the community hospital.

The reporting by Gafni and Dizikes went on to reveal that John Muir's PICU had never once seen enough patients to meet the threshold set by California to ensure that the unit's medical staff kept its skills up. Instead, sources told the reporters, doctors got rusty in the often empty PICU, and didn't always know when to transfer patients to higher-volume children's hospitals that could provide better care. Despite state regulations requiring California to assess its approved PICUs every three years, reporters found that it had been more than five years since John Muir's PICU was reviewed and that the hospital had provided false and inflated volume numbers on its initial application for state approval.

Gafni and Dizikes also obtained highly guarded internal records highlighting concerns over the PICU operations that showed that the hospital's own review boards had flagged problems with competency and transparency in the flailing unit.

After *The Chronicle* published investigations into the deaths, the public reaction was swift. In an unprecedented move, California launched an investigation into not only John Muir's PICU, but into other low-volume PICUs across the state, following calls for a review by national and state lawmakers and local public health leaders, who cited "grave concerns" with the lax oversight.

Additionally, the Medical Board of California announced inquiries into all four of the children's deaths, which are ongoing. The parents of Ailee Jong filed a lawsuit against John Muir. In November, a judge allowed the suit to proceed on allegations that John Muir had fraudulently sold itself as operating in the same league as Stanford.

Perhaps most significantly, dozens of readers wrote to *The Chronicle* commending the reporting and saying it would help them make more informed medical decisions for their own children. And, for the first time, the families of the children who died said that they were finally getting answers to questions that have haunted them since doctors attempted to treat their children at John Muir.

"The medical community failed my granddaughter to the highest degree," the grandmother of one of the children wrote to *The Chronicle* in late December. "My daughter and her husband struggle each day as the calendar reminds them of milestones and special occasions that will never be. ... Thank you for bringing this story to light."

I am honored to submit Dizikes and Gafni's reporting on children's deaths at John Muir Health for the California News Publishers Association Award for Investigative Reporting. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz
Editor-in-Chief, San Francisco Chronicle

No objections, requests for corrections or retractions or other controversies rose after publication.