PACEMAKER

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"Both reps had worked with her (at St. Vincent) before, so that was very helpful," a nurse said in an article in the Grande Ronde Hospital newsletter describing Arden's first pacemaker implant there, in February 2016.

She now works at Providence Medford, where, as of press time, she was accepting new patients.

Providence Health's communications director, Gary Walker, declined to comment on the allegations in the dismissed lawsuit, but said Arden has not done any pacemaker surgeries in Medford, and "a review of our data at Providence St. Vincent and at Providence Medford does not reflect any questions about services performed."

Asked about her hiring in Medford, he said, "We don't discuss an individual's hiring process, but I can tell you that we make every effort to review all available information before hiring any position."

Asked whether the hospital system would do further research now that it had seen the lawsuit, Walker declined to comment.

"We can't comment specifically on the case of one caregiver," he said. "We can tell you that, as a learning organization, Providence uses all the information and data available to make sure we are providing the right care in the right place at the right time for everyone we serve."

Andrew Cutler / EO Media Group

A recently unsealed federal whistleblower lawsuit claimed that a longtime Portland-area cardiologist, Emilia Arden, implanted more than 100 patients with unnecessary pacemakers at Grande Ronde Hospital.

'A great success'

Grande Ronde Hospital is a small, 25-bed facility in La Grande that has several outlying clinics and employs more than 700 people, according to its website. A nonprofit, it reported nearly $106 million in revenue in the fiscal year ending in April 2018.

In February 2016, Arden's implantation of the first pacemaker ever at Grande Ronde was dubbed by the hospital newsletter "a great success."

One year later, the longtime cardiology nurse practitioner, Onwezen, went to work at Grande Ronde and became Arden's assistant.

Onwezen had particular expertise in pacemakers. She also had knowledge of the law.

In 2007, Minnesota federal court records show, Onwezen and two other people sued their former employer, the medical device giant Medtronic, accusing it of offering "illegal kickbacks" as "fraudulent inducements" to doctors and hospitals to promote sales of the firm's cardiac rhythm devices, such as pacemakers and defibrillators.

Under the federal False Claims Act, employees of businesses that defraud the government can blow the whistle and file a lawsuit on behalf of the federal government, collecting a percentage of any money recouped — such as from Medicare.

Such whistleblower lawsuits are filed under seal and kept secret while federal officials conduct an investigation, determine whether the allegations are true and decide whether they want to prosecute the case themselves to recoup funds that had been defrauded.

After investigating Medtronic in Minnesota, federal lawyers validated Onwezen's allegations and took over the case's prosecution, extracting a court settlement from the company of more than $27 million in 2011 — though the firm continued to deny wrongdoing. Court records show that Onwezen and two co-plaintiffs split about $3 million.

New misconduct claims

Six years later, having moved to Oregon, Onwezen found what she deemed wrongdoing at Grande Ronde.

According to her suit, she began complaining of misconduct to her superiors after just a month on the job, in March 2017. She tendered her resignation in June, only to withdraw it after hospital management promised to investigate, according to the suit.

She eventually left for good in April 2018, claiming the hospital had decided to "cover up Arden's misconduct and protect Grande Ronde's reputation."

In all, Onwezen claimed, "the lives of over 100 patients" were placed "in jeopardy" over the course of a year and a half as a result of "implanting unnecessary pacemakers and failing to monitor them" at Grande Ronde.

In addition to naming the hospital, the Aug. 15, 2018, suit also named Arden, two pacemaker manufacturers — Abbott Laboratories and Biotronik Inc. — as well as the companies' sales representatives, whom Onwezen claimed had "induced" Arden's surgeries through gifts such as free travel.

The sales representatives could not be reached for comment. Biotronik and Abbott did not respond to requests for comment.

In the suit, Onwezen claimed the cardiologist employed improper methods to justify pacemakers, including:

- Arden allegedly replaced a 90-year-old man's pacemaker with an MRI-safe model, even though the pacemaker leads that already were in the man meant he still couldn't undergo an MRI, meaning "implantation would be pointless and not worth the extra cost."
- That pacemaker, and five more of the same model, were allegedly implanted by Arden over the course of two days after the pacemaker sales representative informed Arden of a promotion that would reward the sales rep — allegedly a personal friend of Arden — for selling the most in a month.
- Arden allegedly told Onwezen "that Arden had to implant" some Biotronik pacemakers "to get a speaking engagement" and a free trip to a resort in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho.
- Arden allegedly justified "pacemaker implantation whenever possible," including by citing a slow-heartbeat condition that sometimes occurs during sleep. Medicare prohibits implantation of pacemakers for that condition during sleep.
- Slow heartbeat, called bradycardia, is a common side effect of taking beta-blocker blood pressure medication, the suit claimed, and "Arden prescribed beta-blockers to her patients purposefully to induce bradycardia. Arden then used this bradycardia to justify the implantation of pacemakers."
- Arden "falsely documented that patients exhibited symptoms justifying pacemaker implantation. In reality, those patients did not exhibit the documented symptoms, and did not require pacemakers."

Cover-up alleged

Onwezen claimed in her suit that she first raised concerns with a cardiology manager at Grande Ronde in March 2017. The manager allegedly responded that "she was concerned about Arden's high rate of pacemaker implantations, and ... had heard patients complaining that they did not understand why they had received pacemakers."

Onwezen and the manager allegedly reviewed the pacemaker surgeries, and the manager said "she did not find a single instance in which the pacemaker was necessary for the patient."

The suit claims that Grande Ronde management revoked Arden's authority to implant pacemakers in July 2017, then suspended her in August 2017 while her patient files were sent for further investigation.

The outside review allegedly concluded that Arden did not properly evaluate patients for conditions that would disqualify them for pacemakers; did not have adequate documentation to justify implantations; and that "patients experienced the same or worsened heart conditions after Arden's pacemaker implantation," according to the suit.

Onwezen claims she urged the hospital management to refer Arden's patients to outside cardiologists. But management decided that "such referrals could lead to the discovery that the pacemakers were unnecessary, and thereby damage Grande Ronde's reputation and reduce revenue," the suit alleged.

According to the suit, "Arden's former patients were informed that Arden's absence was due to a family emergency. In reality, Grande Ronde had suspended Arden for misconduct that harmed or could have harmed those same patients."

In her statement, Mardi Ford, Grande Ronde Hospital's communications director, noted that it made "certain" reimbursements to Medicare over the questioned pacemaker surgeries, and that the case was voluntarily dismissed.

The federal government, which takes over some whistleblower cases in order to recoup defrauded funds, approved the dismissal of the case on Oct. 23, as well as the unsealing of the suit, "based on its determination that such a dismissal is commensurate with the public interest and that the matter does not warrant the continued expenditure of government resources."

Onwezen's former lawyer, Brown, says the investigation shouldn't end there.

"I would be pretty outraged if one of my loved ones was implanted with a pacemaker that they didn't need."

Baker County CHURCH DIRECTORY

Baker United Methodist Church
Sunday Worship
Casual Service: 8:30 AM
Traditional Service: 10 AM
1919 2nd Street, Baker City
541-523-4201

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
Sunday Worship Service
10:30 AM
1995 4th Street, Baker City
541-523-5201
firstpresbaker.blogspot.com

Third & Broadway
541-523-3891
Calvary Baptist Church
Sundays
10 AM Service
& Children's Church
Thursdays
5:30-6:15 pm
Free Community Dinner
Celebrate Recovery Classes
start at 6:15 pm
www.bakercalvarybaptist.com

CHRISTIAN SCIENCE CHURCH
Sunday Service
11:00 AM
www.ChristianScience.com
3rd & Washington, Baker City
541-523-5911

Baker City
Church of the Nazarene
Sunday Worship 9:45 AM
Pastor Troy Teeter
1250 Hughes Lane, Baker City
(Corner of Cedar & Hughes)
541-523-3533
www.bakernaz.com

THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS
Baker City 1st Ward
Sacrament Meeting 9 AM
Baker City 2nd Ward
Sacrament Meeting 10:30 AM
Baker Valley Ward
Sacrament Meeting 12 PM
2625 Hughes Lane, Baker City
541-523-2397

Elkhorn Baptist Church
Sunday School 10 AM
Morning Worship 11 AM
Evening Worship 6 PM
Discovery Kids Worship
6:30 PM
3520 Birch St, Baker City
541-523-4332

Harvest Church
& HARVEST CHRISTIAN ACADEMY
(Preschool-12 Grade)
Harvest Cafe 9:15 am
Morning Worship 10:10 AM
3720 Birch St, Baker City
541-523-4233
The first Sunday of each month is Mission Breakfast. Donations and non-perishable donations for NEOCC are accepted.

New Beginnings Fellowship
Sunday Morning Worship 10:30 AM
Sunday Evening 6 PM
Weds Service 7 PM
Zan & Dawn Coen
1820 Estes, Baker City
541- 524-1394

FIRST LUTHERAN CHURCH
Sunday Service 11 AM
1734 Third Street, Baker City
541-523-3922
firstlutheranbakercity@gmail.com

ST. BRIGID'S IN THE PINES COMMUNITY CHURCH
11:30 a.m. Services
1st & 3rd Sunday
Holy Eucharist
East Auburn Street, Sumpter
541-523-4812
A Mission of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Baker City

BAKER CITY CHRISTIAN CHURCH
Sunday Worship
First Service 8:30 AM
2nd Service & Sunday School
10 AM
Jr. High & High School Youth
Tues 6:30 PM
Youth Pastor Silas Moe
675 Hwy 7, Baker City • 541-523-5425

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AGAPE CHRISTIAN CENTER
Sunday Services
10:00 AM & 6:30 PM
South Highway 7,
Baker City
541-523-6586

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Saturday Worship
11:00 AM
www.bakercitysda.com
17th & Pocahontas, Baker City
541-523-4913

St. Francis De Sales Cathedral
Established 1904
Daily Masses:
M, T, Th, F 9 AM
Day Chapel in Cathedral
Wed Daily Mass 9 AM
at St. Alphonsus Chapel
Sat 8 AM at Day Chapel
Baker City Saturday Mass 6 pm
Baker City Sunday Mass 9:30 am
St. Therese in Halfway 2 pm Sat
St. Anthony's in North Powder
11:30 Sun
541-523-4521
Corner of First & Church, Baker City

St. Stephen's Episcopal
Services at 9 AM
1st & 3rd Sundays, Holy Eucharist
2nd & 4th Sundays, Morning Prayer
5th Sunday, Morning Prayer
2177 First Street • Baker City
Entrance on 1st Street
Corner Church & First Streets
541-523-4812

Faith Center Foursquare
A Four Square Gospel Church
Worship Service
10:45 AM
1839 3rd St, Baker City
541-523-7915

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