

LOCAL

7 lawsuits filed against USC Medical School clinics over unsafe steroid shots

By JOHN MONK · jmonk@thestate.com

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Unsanitary conditions in preparing injections for steroid shots laden with deadly bacteria that allegedly ruined peoples' lives have led to seven lawsuits being filed in recent weeks against the University of South Carolina Medical School and its related clinics, according to court filings.

The unsanitary conditions at the clinics' orthopedic offices, which the university says have been corrected, took place from December 2012 to December 2013 as a result of "multiple breakdowns" in sanitary procedures, according to the lawsuits.

Although the lawsuits contain seven different plaintiffs alleging harm, they each make the same basic allegations: trusting patients went to the Columbia clinic for injections for a painful shoulder, hip or knee, and were given shots that had become infected with a dangerous bacteria called Mycobacterium Abscessus.

Within a short period, the patients suffered horrible swelling and worsening pain, their lawsuits alleged. Each endured multiple costly operations and have been left with severe physical complications, the lawsuits allege. Many suffered hearing loss.

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Wes Hickman, spokesman for the University of South Carolina, told The State newspaper last week, "The university does not comment on pending litigation." Hickman's "no comment" applied to various doctors named in narratives of some of the lawsuits as allegedly being partly responsible.

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Doctors named in the lawsuits include Jeffrey Guy, a team physician for the Gamecock football team. Guy either gave or oversaw the unsafe injections in five of the patients who filed lawsuits, the suits allege.

Hickman also referred a reporter to statements last summer made by William Anderson, chief medical officer at University Specialty Clinics, to The State when Anderson was asked about reports of infections. At that time, in June, no lawsuits had been filed.

Anderson said then, "Through our review we discovered seven patients who had contracted a mycobacterial infection since December 2012. ... All seven had been treated with injectable medications used to treat injuries and other medical conditions. University Specialty Clinics has taken appropriate actions and treatment is being provided."

According to the seven lawsuits, which relied on patient records, investigations by the state Department of Health and Environmental Control and the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, the infections happened when a syringe was used to draw a numbing agent from a vial, then the same syringe was used to draw a steroid from another vial.

In that way, a "combination steroid/numbing agent" was produced within the syringe, the lawsuits said. Although after being used, the syringes were thrown away, the vials contained multiple doses and were used over and over and left near a sink that harbored deadly bacteria, the lawsuits allege. The vials' tops were not sterilized after each use, the lawsuits allege.

After an internal investigation in late December 2013, the clinic changed its procedures and instituted sterile procedures, keeping vials away from water sources and not using multi-use vials, according to the lawsuits. The clinic notified DHEC and the CDC. After that, there were no more bacteria cases, the lawsuits and a DHEC investigation say.

Named defendants in the lawsuits are the USC School of Medicine, USC Specialty Clinics and USC Specialty Clinics Practice Plan. University Specialty Clinics is the huge medical practice comprised of the physicians at the University of South Carolina School of Medicine in Columbia. It has nearly 200 doctors in 35 specialty areas.

DHEC investigated the cluster of infections from December 2013 through May 2014 but did not release news of the outbreak until asked about it by patients' lawyers and the news media.

DHEC director Catherine Templeton in June told The State there was no need to alert the general public about the outbreak since all the patients known to be affected by toxic bacteria had been located and identified.

According to a May 12 DHEC report obtained by The State, DHEC identified eight cases of M. abscessus between December 2012 and December 2013. It could not be learned what happened to the eighth case.

“A rapidly growing mycobacterium, M.Ab. is closely identified with the bacteria that causes tuberculosis and leprosy,” one lawsuit said.

According to court records, plaintiffs in the lawsuits include:

- Geniene Ciuca, a nursing instructor who alleges that in December 2012, she was administered a steroid injection to her knee, beginning “a saga that would change forever her life and the lives of those who love her, including her husband, James Ciuca.” The first known patient to be infected, it took almost four months for Ciuca to get properly diagnosed, during which time she had multiple surgeries. She is represented by lawyer Cheryl Perkins.
- Leon Jackson, who alleges that in February 2013, after receiving a steroid injection to the knee, began suffering numerous side effects, required multiple surgeries and “remains disabled and disfigured. ... He has suffered lost earnings and lost earnings capacity that may be permanent.” His lawyers are John Kassel and Theile McVey.
- Pamela Wilson, who alleges that in December 2013, she received a shot for bursitis in her knee and soon became very ill. Since then, she has undergone 10 surgeries, her lawsuit said. She eventually had to go to a specialist at Duke University hospital to treat her complications, her lawsuit said. Her lawyer is Bakari Sellers.
- Eric Baker. He alleges that in December 2013, he got a shot “to ease inflammation in his right knee.” As complications developed, he underwent numerous medical procedures and operations and eventually sought help at Duke University hospital. His lawyer is William Padget.
- John Tatum IV. He alleges he received a steroid injection for knee inflammation in December 2013, he developed horrific ailments and had to undergo numerous surgeries. Tatum eventually developed a pulmonary embolism and had to be helicoptered to the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston and, while there, “was placed on a ventilator and a heart lung machine during surgery,” his lawsuit said. His lawyers are Terry Richardson and Brady Thomas.
- Nancy Foster. She alleges that after receiving a steroid injection in December 2013 to relieve inflammation in her hip, she developed infections, had to endure multiple surgeries and wound up being treated at Duke University hospital. Her lawyers are Randall Hood and Cheryl Perkins.
- Drury Hoard. He alleges that in December 2013, after receiving a steroid injection to his knee, his complications caused him to endure numerous surgeries, stop work and go to Duke University hospital for more extensive treatment. His lawyers include Terry Richardson and Elizabeth Branham.

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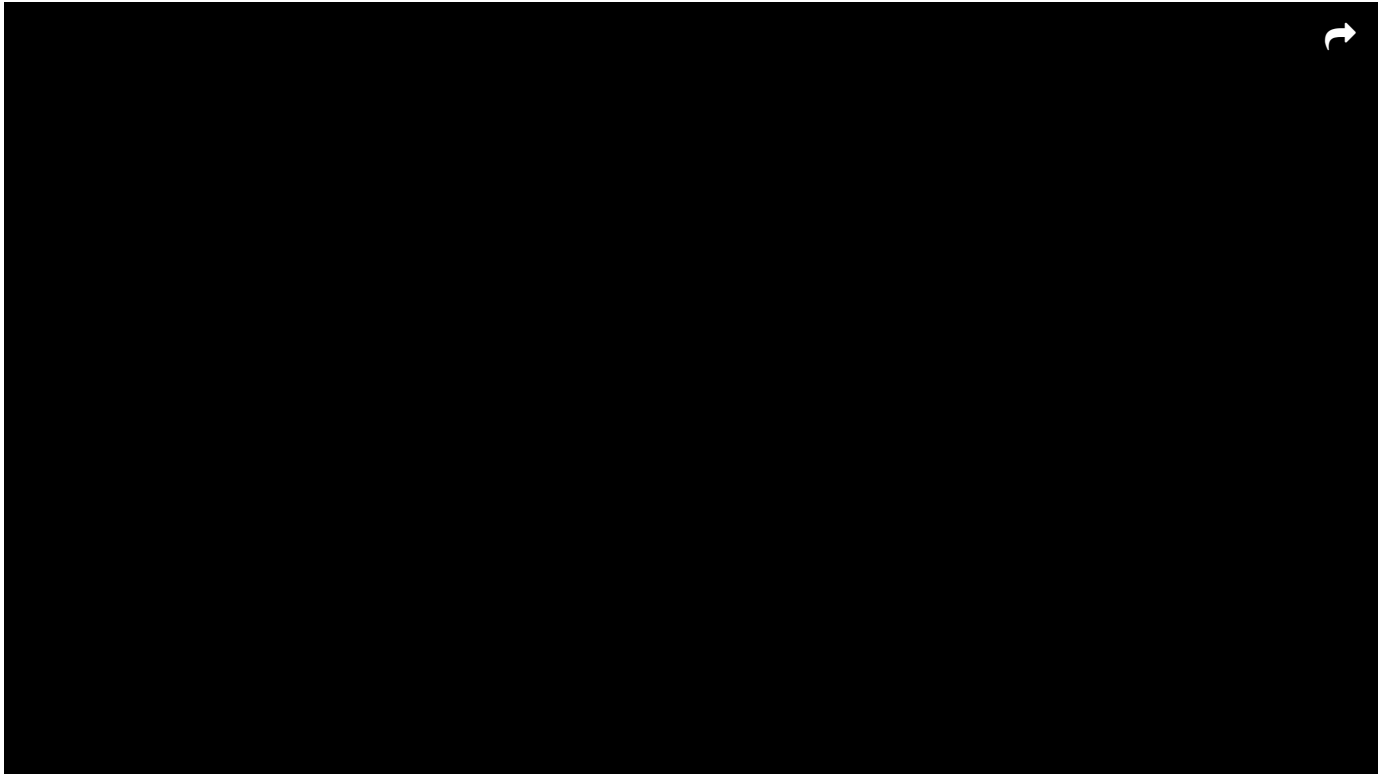
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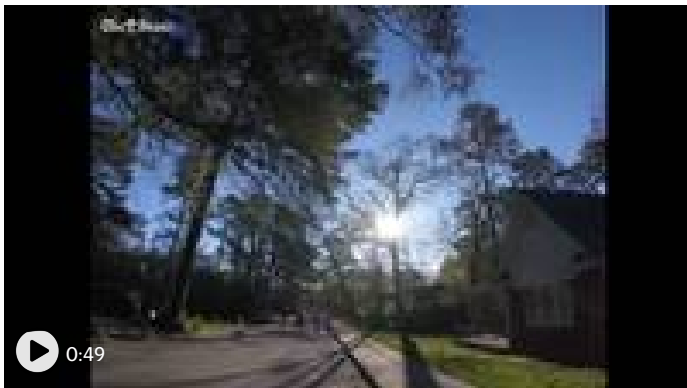
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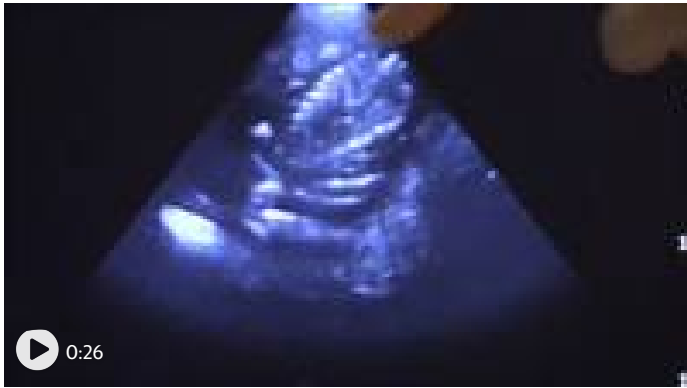
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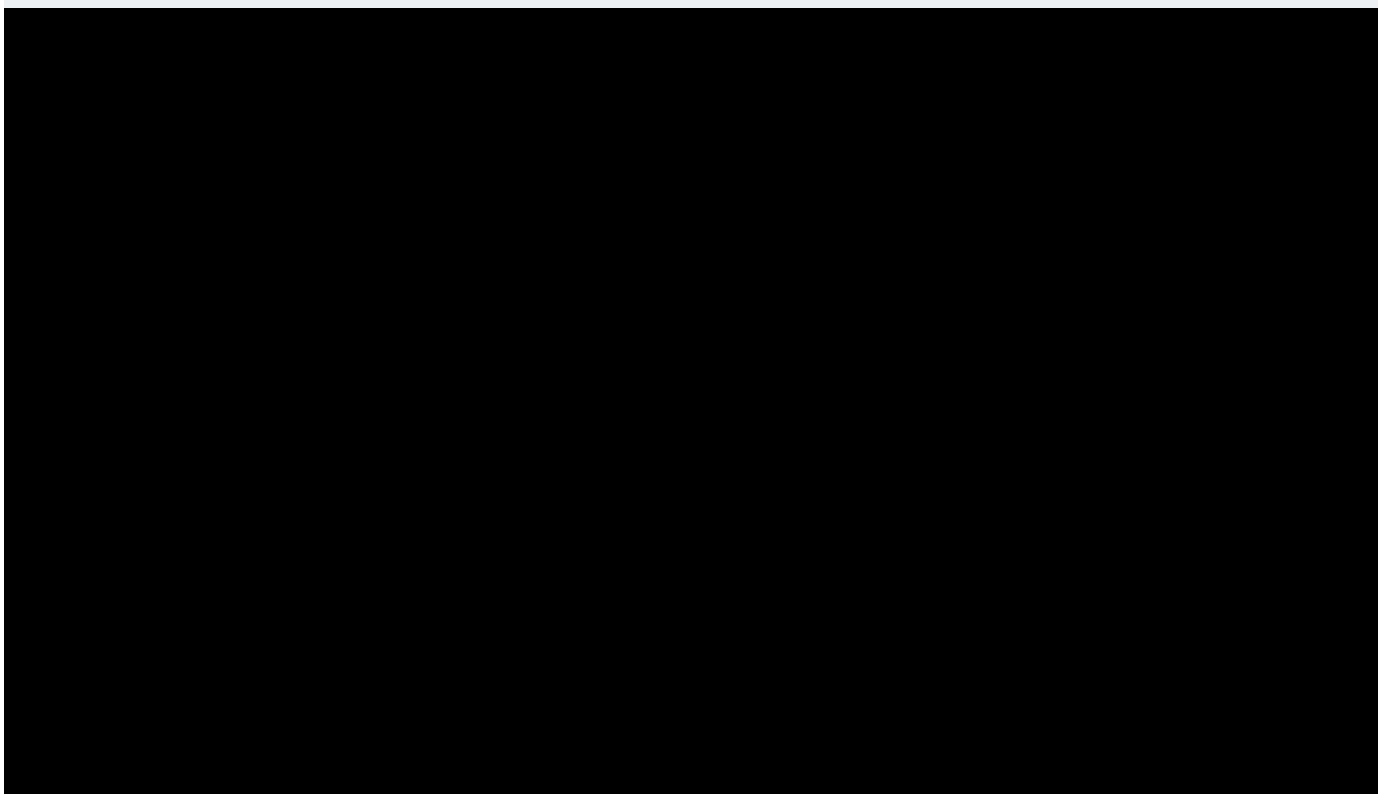
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