

Families sue doctor, weight loss program / 1 dead, 3 ailing after stomach stapling

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The families of four women, one who died and three who were hospitalized in critical condition, are suing a weight loss program and a Houston doctor for allegedly botched stomach-stapling surgeries. Dr. Ramesh Srungaram operated on the women the last week in July at Highland Medical Center in Lubbock, said the families' lawyer, Richard Mithoff of Houston.

The operation, reserved for morbidly obese people, involves stapling the stomach to create a smaller pouch and then rerouting the pouch to the small intestine.

Defendants Community Health Systems and Compass Surgical Weight Loss Program coordinated the sur-

geries through an Internet Web site. Eva Marie McNew, 49, of San Angelo died last week of serious complications from surgery by Srungaram, the suit said.

The physician, Mithoff said, also operated on Natalie "Kay" Parsley, 38, of Magnolia; Julie Scott, 31, of San Angelo; and Judy Poole, 43, of Clayton, N.C., all transferred in critical condition to University Medical Center in Lubbock.

The women learned of the procedures through an Internet Web site listing several doctors, which Mithoff called a "marketing scheme." They were charged up to \$30,000 if they paid cash or up to \$60,000 if the surgery was paid through insurance, he said.

"These women were not adequately screened or referred by qualified

physicians," Mithoff said. "They were solicited by these doctors over the Internet."

Most of the women were scheduled for surgery in a participating hospital in Cleveland, north of Houston, but it was overbooked and the women were transferred to Lubbock, said Mithoff.

Srungaram could not be reached for comment. A Highland Medical Center spokeswoman said neither the hospital nor Community Health Systems had been served and declined comment.

The suit, which seeks unspecified monetary damages, claimed the hospital was ill-equipped to handle post-surgical problems and the doctor was negligent in the operations.