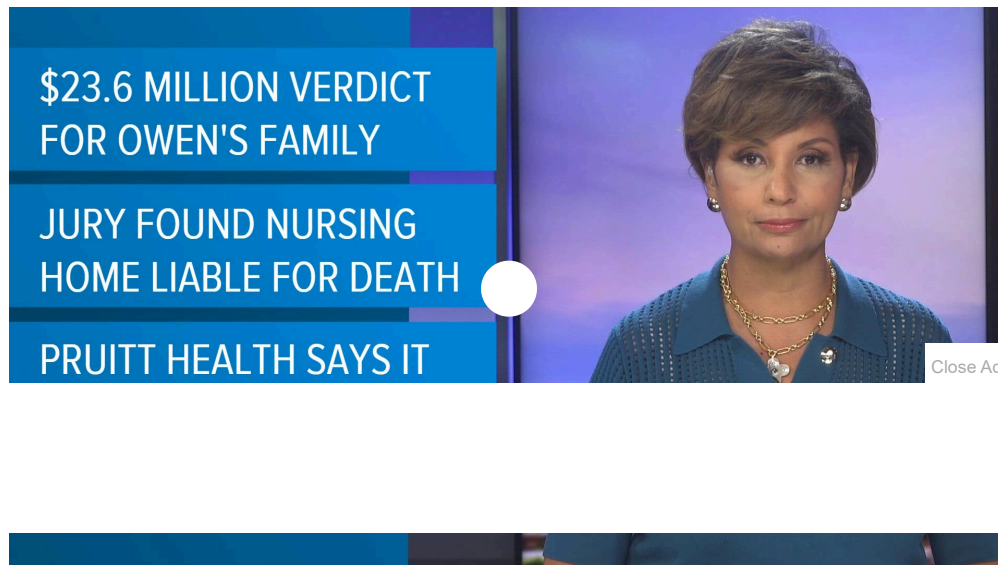


LOCAL NEWS

Jury issues \$23.6 million judgment against Central Georgia nursing home accused of illegally drugging patient

The lawsuit accuses nurses of drugging John Owens with high doses of morphine. They say that PruittHealth's care was responsible for his death.



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FITZGERALD, Ga. — After a brutal physical attack, which left him with a traumatic brain injury, John Owens Jr. was admitted to [Pruitt Health](#) Fitzgerald on January 2020. There, according to court documents, his treatment ended with his untimely death.

"As a direct and proximate result of Defendants' violation of the Bill of Rights for Residents of Long-Term Care Facilities, Mr. Owens suffered pain, injuries, and untimely death, and incurred medical expenses," the lawsuit said.

That's what attorneys for Owens' son said in a wrongful death lawsuit. And, after the case went to trial on Aug. 10, a jury agreed, issuing a \$23.6 million verdict after Owens family argued that Pruitt Health's failure to provide appropriate care was directly responsible for his death.

He died on March 11, 2021 at 1:18 a.m.

While Owens had behavioral problems, the lawsuit says that the nurses' response breached the "standard of care," the legally acceptable conduct for someone in a similar situation.

The lawsuit says that Owens was illegally "chemically restrained" by nurses, who administered high doses of morphine to sedate him, violating his rights as a patient and also violating the law.

"Employees and/or agents of the Corporate Defendants... administered unprescribed morphine to Mr. Owens as a chemical restraint to control Mr. Owens' behavior," the lawsuit said.

And, when the administrator was challenged by a nurse about the "chemically restraining" of Owens, they threatened to fire the whistleblower, according to the lawsuit. They claim the facility's medical director was fired for raising concerns about the issue.

According to the lawsuit, Owens had a problem with his coherence and his behavior, often crawling on the floor and unsafely getting out of bed.

In one documented occasion, a drug test found 3732 ng/ml of morphine, which they believe was administered by the facility's nurses. That level of morphine was well above the therapeutic amount and, under the Patient Bill of Rights for Residents of Long-Term Care Facilities, nurses cannot use drugs to "chemically restrain" a patient unless there's an immediate risk of harm to the patient or others.

They say that the administering morphine to Owens, without a prescription, amounted to "medical battery."

In another case, they claim on March 4, 2021, staff failed to take him to the hospital — which was supposedly the plan — for severe congestion. Days later, the issue continued, and he was then taken to the hospital.

Just days later, on March 11, he would die after being placed on hospice care and his family issued a do-not-resuscitate order, according to the lawsuit.

When heard by a jury, they agreed with Owens family, finding that Pruitt Health was liable for his death.

On top of the \$23.6 million judgment, PruittHealth is also responsible for court costs and interest, according to court records. The case was handled in Gwinnett County State Court, which is where Pruitt Health's corporate headquarters is located.

The lawsuit also pointed fingers at inadequate staffing and failure to properly maintain and administer drugs.

In a statement, PruittHealth says they send their "deepest sympathies" to the Owens family. However, they say they do plan to appeal.

"At the same time, we strongly disagree with the jury's verdict and do not believe it is supported by the evidence presented at trial," PruittHealth said. "We believe there are significant legal and evidentiary issues that warrant further review, and we intend to pursue all available post-trial and appellate options."

They maintain that they are committed to providing quality care to "patients, residents and families who rely on us every day."

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