

Five-year coma patient gives birth

By Pamela Ferdinand
Special to The Washington Post

BOSTON, Oct. 24 -- A 24-year-old woman who has been in a coma for the last five years gave birth to a premature baby girl Friday, several months after she was apparently raped while in the care of a Massachusetts nursing home.

Police and state health officials have begun an investigation into the alleged sexual assault, which an informed official said is believed to have occurred about five months ago at a long-term care facility in Lawrence, Mass., 30 miles north of Boston. The unidentified woman was taken to Lawrence General Hospital after she went into labor and her legal guardians were notified.

Her child was flown to New England Medical Center in Boston later Friday and remained in critical condition in the neonatal intensive care unit Saturday, according to a hospital spokeswoman.

This is the first recorded case in the state -- and the second in the country -- of a woman in a chronic vegetative state becoming pregnant and giving birth, said Mark Leccese, a spokesman for the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. In 1996, a 29-year-old woman from Rochester, N.Y., who had been in a coma for 10 years gave birth to a baby boy.

"We've never experienced a case like this," Leccese said. "People in nursing homes are the most vulner-

able citizens in the state, and it's very important to us to see that they are protected."

A doctor detected the woman's condition Monday after attendants at the Town Manor Nursing and Rehabilitation Center noticed she appeared to be uncomfortable and suspected she might be pregnant. The woman has been comatose and quadriplegic for five years because of a drug overdose, according to one source familiar with the case.

"This is a highly unusual case, no matter what facility you're dealing with," said Karen Gilliland, spokeswoman for the Sun Healthcare Group in Albuquerque, which has operated the Town Manor nursing home since 1994. "We just want to make sure everything is handled appropriately. The most important thing for us right now is protecting the woman's privacy and her family's privacy."

Gilliland declined to provide further details and there was no information about a suspect.

Essex District Attorney Kevin M. Burke said he is appalled by the situation, which has prompted investigations by local police, prosecutors and health department regulators into possible patient abuse and criminal rape.

"In my 20 years as district attorney, I have never seen anything like this," said Burke in a statement. "We are outraged and will continue to vigorously prosecute this case."

In the New York case, a former nurse's aide in a health care center

near Rochester raped and impregnated a patient who had been in a coma for a decade. He was convicted on the basis of DNA tests and imprisoned.

That woman, known only as Kathy, delivered a baby boy who was nine weeks premature and died a few weeks before his first birthday. At the time, doctors said it was unlikely she had any awareness of the rape, pregnancy or birth.

Town Manor is part of a chain of 390 long-term nursing care facilities in 30 states operated by Sun Healthcare Group, which has a number of New England nursing homes that are operated by its SunRise Healthcare subsidiary.

A resident in one of the nursing homes south of Boston was arrested last year for manslaughter after fatally striking a fellow resident in the head. In New Hampshire, a nurse's aide was charged in June with severely abusing patients. Last month, 140 employees at two Massachusetts homes went on strike, demanding higher wages.

The state Department of Public Health has not registered any serious problems at the Lawrence facility, which employs 120 people and has 96 residents. Earlier this year, the nursing home received the highest rating possible in the department's annual survey, which evaluates everything from nurses' services to patient safety during unannounced inspections, Leccese said.

Gunmen fire on funeral of 11-year-old killed in Kosovo

By R. Jeffrey Smith
The Washington Post

PRISTINA, Yugoslavia -- Sharpshooters believed to be part of a government security force fired on gravediggers and several hundred mourners and journalists at a funeral Sunday in central Kosovo for an ethnic Albanian boy who was believed slain by Serbs on Saturday, said witnesses and Western diplomatic observers.

Four U.S. diplomatic observers were among those present Sunday in the village of Krajcova, 18 miles west of Pristina, where the 11-year-old boy's family lives. But they declined a request from his relatives to use the observers' armored car as a shield during the funeral. The observers, who were unarmed, said they could not ensure the family's safety and drove off after urging the family to bury him elsewhere.

The incident, which came two days before a NATO-imposed deadline for the Yugoslav government to withdraw its security forces from Kosovo province, underscores the difficulties Washington and its allies face as they try to get Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic to comply with an Oct. 12 agreement or face possible airstrikes. And it demonstrates the difficulties the observers may face as they monitor troop withdrawals.

One Western official here called Sunday's incident "appalling" but said that if U.S. observers or a team of Finnish forensic experts who visited the site earlier had helped protect the family, their action would have risked leaving an impression that the observers were "on one side" of the bitter ethnic conflict that has engulfed Kosovo since March.

Intensive talks between NATO Supreme Allied Commander in Europe Wesley Clark and Yugoslav military

officials about the troop withdrawal ended in Belgrade Sunday morning, and Clark returned to Brussels to brief diplomatic officials.

"They said a lot of things, but we're waiting to see what they'll do," a senior U.S. official said.

Other Western officials said no additional forces were pulled out of Kosovo Sunday. Instead, some forces were shifted to new locations, including elements of three armored units in the southern Drenica region, roughly surrounding an area where members of an ethnic Albanian guerrilla movement known as the Kosovo Liberation Army have been active in recent weeks.

The Central Drenica region, where the shootings took place, has also been tense, despite a cease-fire pledge several weeks ago from government security forces and the Kosovo Liberation Army. The group is fighting for Kosovo's independence from Serbia, the dominant republic in Yugoslavia, on behalf of ethnic Albanians who make up more than 90 percent of Kosovo's population but have no political or police powers.

During a late-summer offensive, government forces smashed dozens of villages in the region that had supported the rebels, and since then they have erected bunkers along most of the major roads and taken up positions in strategically located, abandoned houses.

Witnesses said that they did not see the shooters Sunday but that the shots appeared to come from an enclave of Serbian security forces that had moved into homes at the edge of town three weeks ago. Relatives of the slain boy, Shemsi Elshani, told those at the scene that Saturday's gunshots appeared to come from the same direction.

Government spokesmen in the provincial capital of Pristina said they

had no comment on either shooting incident, but according to ethnic Albanian sources and a journalist who arrived at the scene Saturday, it occurred while Shemsi, his father Rashit, 37, and cousin, Zymer, 17, were chopping wood on a hillside overlooking Krajcova at midday.

The sources said the weather was clear enough for a sharpshooter to know he was firing at the blond-haired boy, who was found dead with bullet wounds in his head, chest and neck. To retrieve the boy's body, a relative enlisted the assistance of journalists in an armored car rented by a Spanish television network.

Zymer was also shot but was not seriously wounded.

Witnesses said seven villagers were digging the boy's grave in light fog Sunday morning when the shots rang out. The family pleaded unsuccessfully with the U.S. diplomatic observers, who had come to see the body and attend the funeral, to use their car as a shield.

A spokesman for the observers declined to allow team leader Norman Olsen to answer questions about the incident Sunday evening. But U.S. officials and witnesses said Olsen told the family that government troops had shot at U.S. observers in the past and that he did not want mourners to conclude his presence meant they would not be attacked.

After consulting by radio with superiors in suburban Pristina, Olsen said that as an observer, he had no authority to protect them, the officials and witnesses said.

Shemsi's father spurned suggestions that the boy be buried elsewhere because the family had buried the boy's uncle at the same site after he was killed by troops a month ago. The father said he wanted his son to be with the uncle.

Norwegian prime minister wins support by publicizing depression

By T. R. Reid
The Washington Post

OSLO -- There is no special prosecutor hounding Kjell Magne Bondevik, no grand jury, no impeachment proceeding underway. The prime minister's approval ratings are near historic highs. The burning political problem he is dealing with this fall is one that most leaders would love to face: how much of the budget surplus to spend now, and how much to save for the future.

You might think all this good news would make for a happy head of state. In fact, Norway's prime minister has found his job depressing -- so much so that he took two unprecedented steps.

First, the 51-year-old political veteran took 3 1/2 weeks of sick leave. Then he admitted his sickness was psychological: a "depressive reaction" to the constant stress of running a country.

"When I was put on sick leave," Bondevik announced bluntly in a statement, "the reason was simply that my strength was gone. . . . I did not have the energy I needed to meet the challenges."

"I felt I had unlimited capacity," he continued. "Naturally, I did not."

After a healing interlude of sleeping late, walking in the country and meditating, Bondevik came back to work late last month for parliament's debate about the budget surplus. And he discovered he was a hero.

"I wondered at first whether he should talk publicly about depres-

sion," said Cultural Affairs Minister Anne Enger Lahnstein, leader of Norway's Center Party, one of three parties in Bondevik's coalition government. "But he's gotten very good feedback for declaring his problem. People consider him both courageous and honest."

The latest opinion surveys show 85 percent of Norwegians think their prime minister did the right thing when he told the public what was troubling him.

A lot of Norwegians, in fact, seem downright proud of what their leader did.

Watching that reaction, Bondevik's political opponents -- and there are many, because the Christian People's Party leader heads a minority government with just 42 out of 165 seats in parliament -- have been conspicuously quiet.

The closest thing to outright criticism has come from Norway's most outspoken politician, Carl Hagen, leader of the Progress Party.

"Obviously, we can't have a prime minister who is not strong enough to be prime minister," Hagen said. "Bondevik is popular, and he can admit to this -- but only once."

Hagen also raises a question that probably would occur to most foreign leaders observing Oslo's political scene. "What does our prime minister have to be depressed about anyway?" he snorted. "We have a big state surplus, no debt, full employment, inflation of 2 or 3 percent. What Norway has, most countries wish they had."

It is, in fact, a common observation here, where the ice-blue fiords stretch past forested hills beneath a powder blue sky, that Norway has unusual blessings. "The standard line here is that God must be a Norwegian," laughed Per Egil Hegge, a political expert at the national newspaper Aftenposten. "He gave us oil, he gave us fish, he gave us timber, and he gave us a beautiful land to enjoy it in."

But Bondevik, a Lutheran minister who has been in politics for 25 years, is saying that running a country, even Norway, might be too demanding for ordinary people.

As part of a new regimen designed to ration his time, the prime minister is no longer granting interviews. But in a statement about his illness, he cited the "numerous tasks" he faced and the inability to find any private space in his life.

By admitting his depression, Bondevik said, he wanted "to demystify something which is fairly common, but which many people have problems talking about openly." He also hoped to start a debate "on the boundaries between what is public and what is private."

British psychiatrist Anthony Storr has observed that depression is fairly common among national leaders. Former British prime minister Winston Churchill wrote movingly about his bouts with the "black dog." Russian President Boris Yeltsin has written of times when "everything within me was burned out."

Gene linked to right-handedness

By Jamie Talan
Newsday

Scientists scouting for genes to explain whether a person feels more comfortable using his left hand or right have always come up empty-handed. Now, a geneticist says he may have an answer.

Amar Klar of the National Cancer Institute says researchers have primarily sought genes linked to the 15 percent of the population born left-handed, since by percentage alone this would be considered an anomaly. But "this has been a big mistake," he says.

At a recent symposium, Klar reported that a mathematical study of about 50 families over three generations -- modeled on a computer -- suggests that there's a gene link to being right-handed, but none to being left-handed.

That gene, dubbed RGHT by Klar and his colleagues at NCI's Frederick Cancer Research and Development Center in Maryland, expresses itself when it is located on both chromo-

somes handed down from parents. When it is missing from both chromosomes, referred to as a double recessive by geneticists, the choice is random: about half will be right handed and half will be southpaws.

"It's like a genetic fork in the road," Klar said. "A toss of the coin."

Klar presented his evidence at a neurobiology symposium Monday sponsored by the Whitehead Institute in Cambridge, Mass. He found families where the parents, both right handed, had children who were left-handed. When these children married right-handed spouses, he said, 23 percent of the children are born left-handed. If handedness is due to non-genetic factors, then only 8 percent of these children would have been left-handed, Klar said.

These children of right-handed parents are producing as many lefties as a mixed-handed couple would, he added.

Now, with this model in place, Klar hopes to recruit families in an effort to pinpoint the right-handed gene.

After he collects enough families -- he is looking for right-handed couples who produced at least two left-handed children -- it will take six months to a year to test their DNA for a gene for right-handedness.

Klar said he suspects that the lefties born into these families have a mutation of the RGHT gene. If there is no genetic information at the fork in the road, the person makes the choice what direction to go.

The federal researchers will scan the entire genome since at present there are no candidate chromosomes on which to start the hunt. Ultimately, he hopes the finding will help the field understand why the two hemispheres of the brain have such specialized functions. For instance, 97 percent of people who are right-handed have a dominant left-hemisphere devoted to language compared to 70 percent of lefties.

Lefties with right-handed parents can e-mail the federal researcher at: klar@ncifcrf.gov.

Students with vouchers show slight gains

By Linda Perlstein
The Washington Post

Low-income students who used vouchers to attend New York private schools showed slightly greater improvements in math and reading tests than their peers who remained in public elementary schools, according to a report released Tuesday.

The study, conducted by Harvard University and Mathematica Policy Research, boosted the case of voucher supporters, who believe poor children should have the same opportunity to benefit from a private school education that wealthier children do.

Researchers evaluated the academic performance of about 700 children attending private schools with the financial assistance of a scholarship foundation, and compared their test scores with those of students who had applied but were not selected in the program's lottery. The students were given the same standardized math and reading tests at the beginning and end of the

1997-98 school year. On average, the voucher students boosted their scores about two percentage points more than the students in the control group, most of whom attended public schools.

The difference was greatest in math for private school fourth graders, who raised their scores nearly seven percentage points more than the control group, and in reading for fifth graders, who improved their scores by six percentage points.

"If you can get these same effects over the next five years, you can eliminate the differences between blacks and whites," said Paul Peterson, the Harvard professor who led the study. Almost all of the students in the voucher program were either black or Latino.

Bella Rosenberg, assistant to the president of the American Federation of Teachers, (AFT) dismissed the study as the product of "an avowed voucher advocate." She said the reported effects were small, and could be explained by the smaller class sizes found in the pri-

ivate schools these children attended.

Voucher opponents such as the AFT claim such programs drain funds that could be helping to improve public schools.

Peterson said that there is no evidence the New York program is having a significant impact on younger children. Third-graders in the program actually did not improve as much public school students did.

In the upper grades, private school parents reported less tardiness, cheating and destruction of property. "It may be that the private schools are better able to sustain an educationally productive climate for older children," Peterson said.

Two U.S. cities -- Milwaukee and Cleveland -- provide vouchers for students to attend private schools using taxpayer money. Although several studies have been conducted, there is no consensus on whether vouchers improve students' skills.

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