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2 babies' deaths at Miami Children's Hospital investigated

BY YUDY PINEIRO

Miami-Dade Health Department officials have started an investigation to determine what caused the deaths of two infants in a unit at Miami Children's Hospital.

The hospital confirmed Thursday that two infants died of undisclosed causes in its Neonatal Intensive Care Unit earlier in the week.

Specimens from the two children were sent to the state's health laboratory Thursday morning. County officials said they did not expect to receive the lab's results until early next week.

"We haven't gotten anything in writing from Miami Children's Hospital, so as far as elaborating on the type of bacteria that's causing the infection or anything like that, we prefer not to say because it's all been word-of-mouth," Vincent Conte, a senior physician from the county agency's epidemiology and disease control unit, said Thursday.

Word of the deaths spread quickly after they were reported Wednesday night by WTVJ-NBC 6, citing but not identifying the head of an outside neonatal care practice.

Fermin Leguen, the health department's medical executive director, said it was not unusual for children, especially those born prematurely, to die because of infection.

"These are kids who are very fragile," Leguen said. "What is unusual is to have two children die in consecutive days because of an infection."

Conte said he received a call Monday morning from the hospital's infectious diseases doctor notifying him that two babies had died from what they assumed was some sort of infection. Another infant was ill.

Conte said the third baby affected by the bacteria is improving, but faces other medical problems.

After hearing from the doctor, Conte said he visited the hospital Wednesday and spoke to top officials and the head of infectious-disease control at the hospital, 3100 SW 62nd Ave. He also inspected the neo-natal unit, which hospital officials told him they had cleared and thoroughly cleaned as soon as they learned of a possible contamination.

"I was assured that everything that can be done is being done right now to ensure the safety of all the children in the hospital," Conte said.

He said he did not know whether babies had since been moved back into the unit.

Lilian Rivera, an administrator with the department, urged the community not to lose confidence in the hospital and to avoid making comments that the hospital is unsafe.

"Miami Children's Hospital, as you all know, is an important hospital in our community. It attends to the needs of many, many children not only here locally but in the Caribbean and internationally," Rivera said. "They have high-quality care."

Located just west of Coral Gables, Miami Children's Hospital was founded in 1950, and serves children exclusively. It has 298 pediatric and neonatal beds, and 650 physicians practicing 40 pediatric specialties and subspecialties.

Asked about the deaths Thursday, spokeswoman Rachel Perry declined to discuss specifics.

The hospital did release a statement saying: "The definitive cause of the babies' deaths is not yet determined, but we continue to actively pursue conclusive information. The hospital has collaborated with the Miami-Dade County Department of Health, taking every precautionary measure to protect and ensure the safety of all our patients."

The hospital said privacy laws prevented it from giving specific information about the patients.

Miami Herald staff writer Fred Tasker contributed to this report.

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