

Hope dims for woman tossed from UTMB

By Harvey Rice | February 9, 2012 | Updated: February 9, 2012 10:15pm

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Photo By Mayra Beltran

Maria Sanchez, shown with her husband, Luis Aguillon, was ejected from UTMB and advised to return to Mexico for treatment of a life-threatening spinal tumor.
Photo: Mayra Beltran / © 2012 Houston Chronicle

GALVESTON - After doctors at the **University of Texas Medical Branch** forced undocumented patient **Maria Sanchez** out of **John Sealy Hospital** last year, Sanchez and her husband found new hope for treatment of a life-threatening spinal tumor at Houston's **Ben Taub Hospital**.

But a year after Sanchez, 25, was ejected from UTMB and advised to go back to Mexico for treatment, **Ben Taub** doctors have told her there is nothing more they can do. As she faces the prospect of death, her husband, **Luis Aguillon**, 37, is being billed by hospitals seeking more than \$100,000 while he cares for his partially paralyzed wife and their 4-year-old daughter, Melissa.

The family is caught in a medical system ill-suited to serve the illegal and the uninsured, said **Pancho Arguelles**, adviser to the **Living Hope Wheelchair Association** for spinal injury patients.

"This is a failure of American society to respond to the needs of those who are more vulnerable," Arguelles said. "You can tell a society by how the most vulnerable are treated."

Chemotherapy and radiation failed to curb the growing tumor at the base of Sanchez's neck, leading doctors to

ask her to make end-of-life decisions.

"I told the doctors I want a natural death," said Sanchez, who can no longer walk or use her hands. "I don't want to be stuck on a ventilator."

Breaking into sobs, she said, "I've been having such a hard time, too much pain; I just want to let it go."

Sanchez doesn't blame UTMB for her condition but says things might have been different if UTMB had allowed the operation to remove a tumor that was then the size of a banana.

"I don't blame them, but last year they could have done the surgery," Sanchez said.

UTMB declined comment.

Dr. **Ricardo Nuila**, who has been treating Sanchez at Ben Taub, said the tumor is growing and is likely to lead to paralysis, pain and death.

If UTMB doctors had been allowed to operate on Sanchez a year ago, it's uncertain the outcome would have been different. Doctors operated on Sanchez soon after her Feb. 7, 2011, arrival at Ben Taub, about a month after she was ejected from UTMB. Nuila said the standard procedure for such tumors is to operate and look at the tumor.

Ben Taub or nothing

If the tumor is an astrocytoma like Sanchez's, doctors halt the operation because that type of tumor creeps inside the spine. Trying to remove it is normally considered too dangerous, as doctors at Ben Taub decided, Nuila said. Nuila declined to comment on what might have happened at UTMB but said the procedure he outlined is standard.

Nuila believes patients like Sanchez often end up on Ben Taub's doorstep because other hospitals want paying patients.

"It's not uncommon to see this," he said. "A patient has been told specifically to go to Ben Taub or has been told to leave."

Aguillon, a welder who is a legal U.S. resident, has had scant time to work while caring for his wife and daughter. Meanwhile, he watches the bills pile higher.

UTMB continues to bill the couple for more than \$13,000, the debt at Ben Taub has risen to \$65,000, and **Memorial Hermann-Texas Medical Center** wants \$26,000. Sanchez went to Memorial Hermann after being thrown out of UTMB. She was admitted for a few days but was told that she could not be helped.

Memorial Hermann declined to comment specifically on the case but issued a statement saying it strives to provide good care regardless of a patient's ability to pay and has a process to assist patients in financial hardship "within the resources available."

The couple was living in Galveston when Sanchez began experiencing symptoms. Aguillon took his wife to four hospitals and three clinics before finding care.

'Mean and tough'

The couple went to the emergency room at **Clear Lake Regional Hospital** in Webster, which transferred Sanchez to UTMB, according to records. She spent more than a week undergoing tests at UTMB and was scheduled for surgery when she was ordered to leave, records show. Sanchez said a Spanish-speaking doctor confronted her.

"He was so mean and tough," she said. "It was so hard that I can't explain it because I was really upset."

Records show she was discharged because she was an illegal immigrant and uninsured. Scrawled on her discharge slip is a sentence saying she should get surgery in Mexico. The couple moved from Galveston to Houston so Sanchez could qualify for treatment at Ben Taub.

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