

Engaging whistleblowers: A case study

Kathleen McGrory

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A TIMES INVESTIGATION

Johns Hopkins promised to elevate All Children's Heart Institute. Then patients started to die at an alarming rate.



Leslie Lugo's family visits her grave in September.

HEARTBROKEN

STORY BY KATHLEEN McGRORY AND NEIL BEDI, PHOTOS BY EVE EDELHEIT | Times Staff

Sandra Viquez paced the heart unit at Johns Hopkins All Children's Hospital.

Her 5-month-old son, Sebastián Vistha, lay unconscious in his hospital crib, breathing faintly through a tube. Two surgeries to fix his heart had failed, even the one that was supposed to be straightforward.

Viquez saw another mom crying in the room next door. Her baby was also in bad shape.

Down the hall, 4-month-old Leslie Lugo had developed a serious infection in the surgical incision that snaked down her chest. Her parents argued with the doctors. They didn't

believe the hospital room had been kept sterile.

By the end of the week, all three babies would die.

The string of deaths in mid 2017 was unprecedented. Nurses sobbed in their cars. The head of cardiovascular intensive care sent an email urging his staff to take care of themselves and each other.

The internationally renowned Johns Hopkins had taken over the St. Petersburg hospital six years earlier and vowed to transform its heart surgery unit into one of the nation's best.

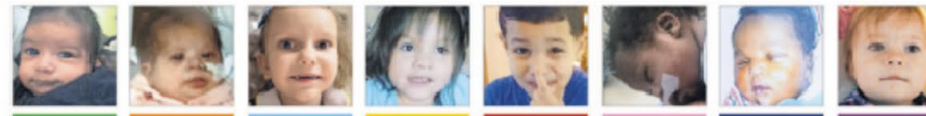
Instead, the program got worse and worse until chil-

dren were dying at a stunning rate, a Tampa Bay Times investigation has found.

Nearly one in 10 patients died last year. The mortality rate, suddenly the highest in Florida, had tripled since 2015.

Other children suffered life-changing injuries. Joan Karid Viera Maldonado had a heart transplant at All Children's in March 2017. Soon after, the stitching connecting the 5-year-old's new heart to his body broke, and he had a massive stroke. Today, he can no longer walk, speak or feed himself. His parents care for him full time.

▶ See CHILDREN, 12A



EIGHT CHILDREN: All of these kids went to the Heart Institute and had problems with their care. Four died. Read their stories, beginning on 12A.



It started with a tip.

I have never seen two esteemed surgeons released unceremoniously, along with the Director of the postoperative unit. Then to send an open letter to employees to "just tell the truth." Well what is the truth? Are children being harmed? Mistakes covered up?

Lessons learned:

(1) Medical professionals don't love to dish about their colleagues on the record.

(2) Can your sources point you to information that already exists in the public record?

(3) Can they point you to data and documents that may not be public but limit their exposure?

(4) There's power in numbers.

(5) Push for specificity.

**(6) Go to great lengths to
vet the information.**

Questions?

Be in touch!

kathleen.mcgrory@propublica.org