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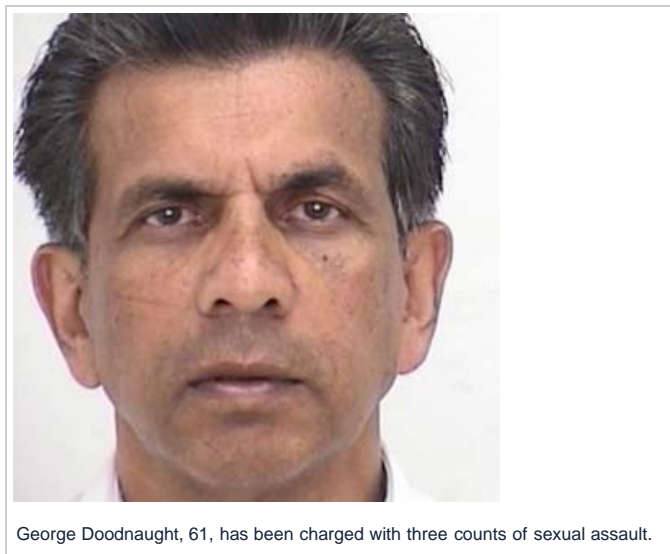
Police are urging potential victims to come forward and North York General Hospital is boosting its patient hotline after a long-serving anesthetist at the hospital was charged with assaulting women during surgery.

Dr. George Doodnaught, 61, has been charged with three counts of sexual assault after three women reported they had been attacked while under an anesthetic.

The ages of the alleged victims range from the mid-30s to late 80s.

One woman told police she was attacked in 2007, and the others said they were assaulted this year.

"They are in an anesthetic state and the three victims we currently have, between 2007 and 2010, have the ability to recall sexual acts (that) occurred to them during their procedures," said Det. Const. Julie Stehlik, of 33 Division.



George Doodnaught, 61, has been charged with three counts of sexual assault.

"We believe there may be other victims out there and we appeal to them to come forward so we can investigate and they may assist us in our criminal investigation," Stehlik added.

The Ontario College of Physicians and Surgeons has also launched an investigation, police said.

Asked when North York General first became aware of concerns about Doodnaught, hospital president Bonnie Adamson told a news conference that the facility received a complaint from a patient in the middle of last month. The hospital took immediate action to ensure he stopped working there while being investigated, she said.

It's unclear why the hospital only became aware of problems in February when the first allegation of an attack dates back to 2007.

Asked if the hospital acted early enough, Adamson said: "We acted promptly after receiving the complaint."

The hospital's acting vice-president Dr. David White explained that specifics of the cases could not be discussed because the police investigation is ongoing.

"In my 30 years as a family doctor, I can tell you that this is an extremely unusual situation," he said.

White described the surgical environment as a very busy place with many other people entering and exiting. He said it's possible an anesthetist could be alone with a patient but added that typically other health professionals are around.

When asked if protocols would be revisited to ensure there is more than one health professional in the presence of a sedated patient, hospital officials said the investigation into the cases could indicate whether changes are necessary.

White said when patients come out of anesthesia, they can have a variety of experiences and memories.

Asked if anesthesia could result in false memories, he said: "One of the things that we know that anesthetics can do is cause dreams, vivid hallucinations, you know if you want to call them false memories, I don't know, but those are recognized side effects of some of the medications that are used under anesthesia."

Doodnaught, who graduated from university in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1974, has worked at North York General and its affiliate, Branson Hospital, for 28 years.

It's typical for an anesthetist to assist in several surgeries a day, White said.

Police say Doodnaught worked at other facilities in the GTA and believe there may be more victims.

They are appealing to other victims, or anyone who may have heard or seen anything that could assist in the investigation, to contact the Toronto police sex assault squad at 416-808-4040.

North York General has beefed up staffing on its patient and family information line and is welcoming any former patients who have questions or concerns about their care to call 416-756-6271 between 8 a.m. to 10 p.m.

Adamson tried to reassure the public about patient safety at North York General, emphasizing that all of the allegations are associated with one physician.

"Patients should continue to feel safe when coming to our hospital for care," she said.

Adamson said the allegations have come as a blow to hospital staff.

"I speak for our entire staff when I say that we are shocked and devastated that anything like this may have happened at North York General Hospital."

She expressed her sympathy to the alleged victims.

"I cannot imagine how painful this must be for the patients and their families who have come forward," she said.

Doodnaught appeared in court Wednesday and was granted bail.

His next court appearance is scheduled for April 1.