

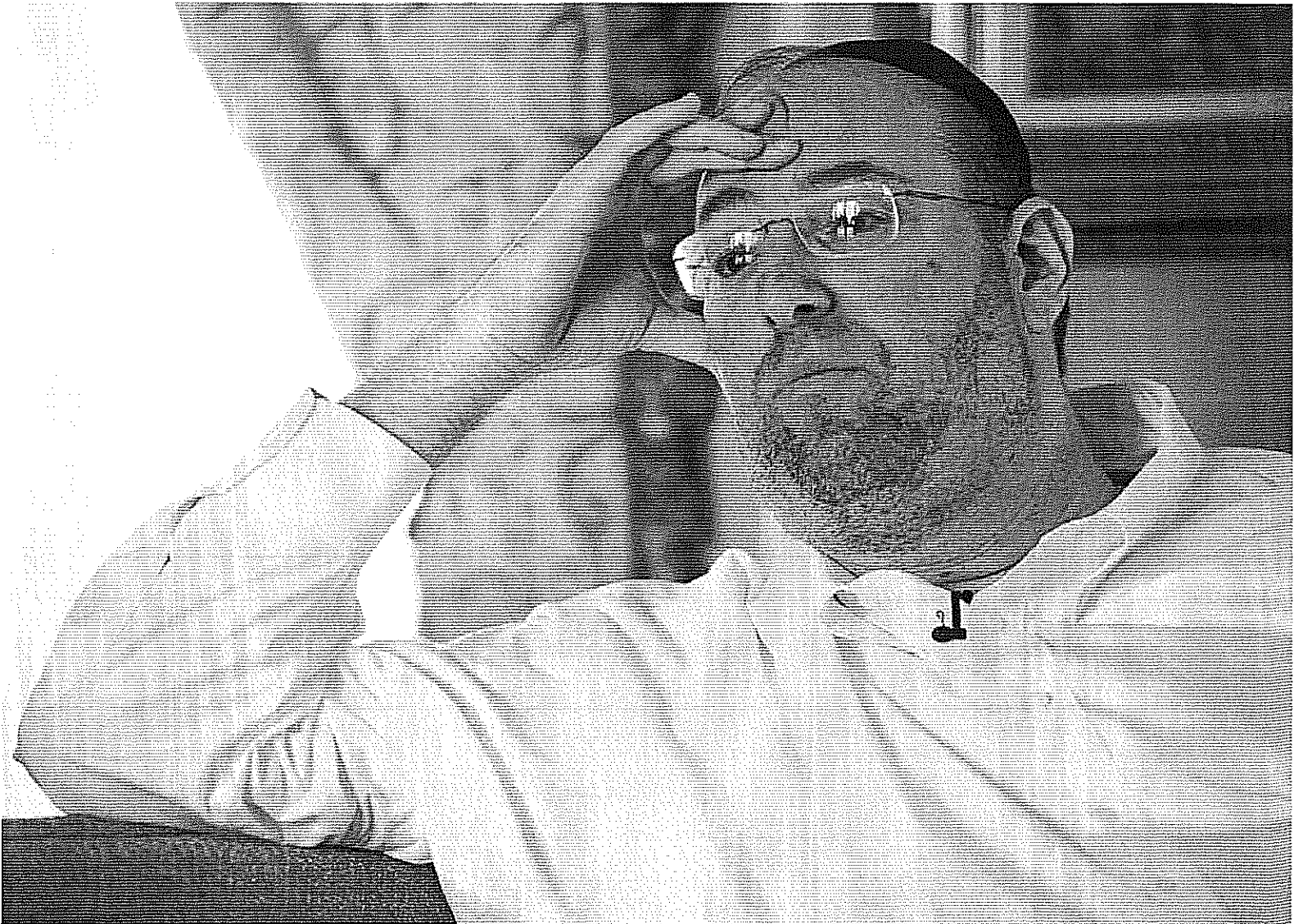
# California's largest nursing home owner sued

## HIGHLIGHTS

Unsupervised mentally ill patient lit herself on fire

Family claims nursing home failed to treat her

South Pasadena facility has been ongoing source of controversy





BY MARJIE LUNDSTROM  
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The family of a 57-year-old nursing home resident who committed suicide last year by lighting herself on fire in public has sued the state's largest nursing home owner over the woman's gruesome death in suburban Los Angeles.

The lawsuit, filed Wednesday in Los Angeles Superior Court, accuses businessman Shlomo Rechnitz and several companies of operating a facility in South Pasadena that endangered patients and allowed mentally ill residents to languish in order to "maximize profits."

The facility, Mission Grove Healthcare & Wellness Centre, situated in the city's historic downtown district, has been an ongoing source of public controversy. South Pasadena police say they have been burdened by calls for service in and around the nursing home, often related to criminal activity by residents.

Courtney Cargill's suicide last November capped a tumultuous year for Rechnitz and the nursing home, which failed four consecutive inspections in 2014 by health officials.

Formerly known as South Pasadena Convalescent Hospital, the facility was one of three California nursing homes owned by Rechnitz to be decertified by the federal government between October and January – stripping all three of their vital Medicare and Medi-Cal funding.

Rechnitz, 44, has quickly become California's most influential nursing home owner, controlling 1 in every 14 skilled nursing beds across the state, according to a Sacramento Bee investigation published in June. His mushrooming network of 81 facilities, as of March, included Roseville Point Health & Wellness Centre in Placer County and 25 more facilities in Northern California, according to a list his company provided.

Rechnitz's spokeswoman, Sallie Hofmeister, declined Wednesday to specify the current extent of his California nursing home holdings.

In the past year, his facilities have become the focus of state and federal scrutiny and a flurry of citations and fines for alleged poor quality care. The South Pasadena facility, for instance, was hit with 24 citations in March and April and \$195,500 in fines from the

California Department of Public Health. State inspectors identified a host of problems, including the facility's alleged failure to properly supervise Cargill, a resident known by staff to be suicidal with a history of schizophrenia, anxiety disorder and involuntary psychiatric holds.

Hofmeister declined to comment on the lawsuit. In a March interview, Rechnitz and his attorney contended that the business owner had been unfairly targeted by government regulators.

In that interview, Rechnitz expressed pride in the South Pasadena operation and its history of generally positive inspections. Rechnitz said he was “shocked” by last year’s failure of four consecutive surveys that led to the facility’s decertification.

The Cargill family’s lawsuit contends that Courtney, who had been placed there by the public guardian, was not treated for her mental health problems. Instead, the nursing home housed her in “a ‘room and board’ fashion, content to let her smoke cigarettes and watch TV all day,” according to the complaint.

“It wasn’t the right place for her,” said attorney Jody Moore, who is representing the family. “She wasn’t getting the services she needed.”

Despite Courtney Cargill’s poor decision-making capabilities and irrational behavior, the lawsuit states, staff members made arrangements allowing her to leave the facility “on pass,” alone and unsupervised. The lawsuit contends that the sign-out sheet “falsely” indicated that Cargill returned to the facility at 9:30 a.m. on the morning she lit herself on fire – even though she was immediately rushed to a hospital, where she died the next day.

“It’s just really impacted the small family we have,” said her sister Casey Cargill, 62, of Costa Mesa. “Nobody helped her in any way over there. To let her languish without any treatment – it’s just so sad.”

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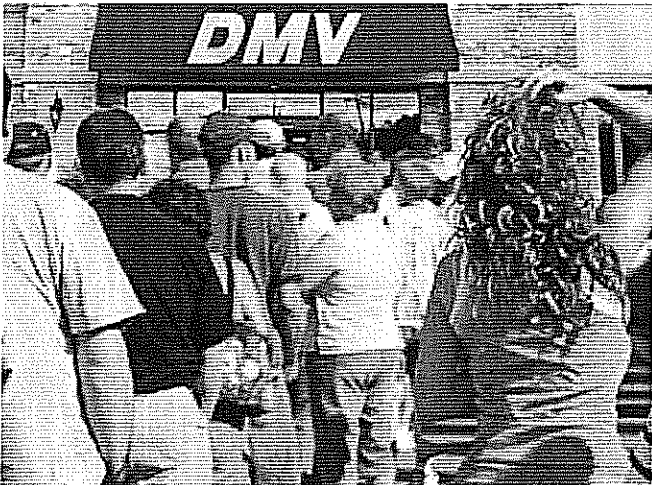
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