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Posted on Sat, Jul. 16, 2005

'Code Pink.' Baby missing. Not a drill.

Bracelet triggers alert of infant being taken

KAREN GARLOCH
Staff Writer

Pat Campbell jumped out of her chair when she heard the overhead page at Presbyterian Hospital at 9 Friday morning.

"Code Pink," the operator repeated. "Code Pink."

Campbell, executive director of women's and children's services, hadn't been notified of a drill. She knew this alert must be real: A baby had been abducted from the nursery.

Campbell ran out of her meeting, down a flight of stairs and through the ground-floor halls toward the front of Charlotte's second-largest hospital.

Along the way, she noticed employees guarding exit doors, as they had practiced in so many drills. They were stopping anyone who looked suspicious, inspecting bags or coats big enough to hide an infant.

Out of breath, Campbell kept thinking, "We've got the security. We'll find the baby."

She had been one of those who pushed for a new ankle bracelet security system when the hospital's center for women and children opened last September.

In addition to two wrist bracelets every baby wears to match those on the wrists of its parents, every newborn now gets an ankle bracelet that's connected to a hospital computer system.

Every ankle-bracelet's number shows up on a map that nurses can monitor from a computer screen. If a baby were to leave the seventh floor, its ankle bracelet would trigger an audible alarm that would prompt nurses to call a "Code Pink."

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When that happened Friday, nurses could see which baby was missing from the map.

But Campbell was downstairs and didn't know. She just hoped the child was still in the building.

Then, she saw Dawn Pressley, a nurse from the newborn nursery, run out the front door toward Hawthorne Lane. The baby must be gone. Campbell ran out too.

At the sidewalk on Hawthorne, where a circular drive offers a usually peaceful drop-off and pick-up point for patients, they waited anxiously.

Campbell spotted a woman who appeared to be the baby's mother and walked over to ask if she needed anything. Minutes later, a security guard walked toward them carrying a black mesh duffel bag. "We found the (suspect), and here's the baby," Campbell recalled him saying.

She took the bag and held the 4-day-old boy, whose head was uncovered. He was wrapped in a blue-and-pink striped blanket.

He was asleep.

Campbell took the baby back to the nursery, where a nurse practitioner and a doctor examined him and found him unharmed. He remains in the hospital.

Outside, police caught the baby's father, Walter Edward Mitchell, several blocks away on Park Drive.

Both Mitchell and the baby's mother, Juanita Annette Slade, were arrested and taken to the Mecklenburg County jail.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg police said the baby was born Monday, before arriving at the hospital. Details of the baby's admission and health were not available because of privacy laws.

Slade said her other children are in the custody of the Mecklenburg County Department of Social Services and she didn't want DSS to take her newborn too, police said. DSS apparently had been preparing to take custody of the baby, police said.

Both Mitchell and Slade are charged with child abuse, contributing to the delinquency of a minor and resisting arrest. Mitchell was also charged with communicating threats to security officers and second-degree trespassing. Slade also had an outstanding warrant for failure to pay child support.

According to N.C. court records, Mitchell has been convicted of several misdemeanors in the last two years, including possession of drug paraphernalia, shoplifting and larceny.

The unusual incident was the talk of Presbyterian Friday. Although pleased with the response and the outcome, Campbell and other hospital officials will meet soon to review their security measures.

Sometime soon, there will be another "Code Pink." But Campbell expects to know about this one ahead of time.

It will be a drill.

kytja weir contributed.


