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How Watchung's Bruce Ruck helped to capture the 'killer nurse'

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Watchung resident Bruce Ruck, who is the managing director of the New Jersey Poison Control Center, is featured in the documentary "Capturing the Killer Nurse" for his role in the Charles Cullen investigation.

WATCHUNG – When Bruce Ruck started getting multiple calls about unexplained digoxin levels in patients' blood, he knew something sinister was happening.

In June 2003, a nurse from Somerset Medical Center – now known as RWJ University Hospital Somerset in Somerville – informed Ruck that one of her patient's digoxin levels was rising, despite the patient no longer receiving the drug. Digoxin is a drug used to treat heart failure.

"That made no sense," Ruck said.

Ruck, a borough resident and managing director of the New Jersey Poison Control Center, has been an employee with the poison center since 1989. He's also a longtime Watchung Board of Health member, who is now president.

At first, Ruck believed the heightened digoxin levels to be a medication error. But two weeks later, he received another call.

A Somerset Medical Center pharmacist asked Ruck to explain traces of digoxin in a patient's blood. It was not the same case that the nurse had previously called about, Ruck said.

There was other strange evidence at the hospital, such as patients experiencing low blood sugar and high potassium. Ruck explained that these are "some of the classic things that you would use" if a health care professional wanted to fatally harm someone.

"That's when I said, 'It sounds like you have a police matter on your hands,'" he said.

Ruck is featured in the Netflix documentary, "Capturing the Killer Nurse," as a key player in the story behind the investigation of serial killer nurse Charles Cullen.

The film was released on the streaming service in November 2022. It's intended to be a companion to the Netflix movie "The Good Nurse," starring Eddie Redmayne and Jessica Chastain.

"He (Cullen) killed multiple people in multiple hospitals before we ever got involved," Ruck said.

Cullen started his career in 1989, and worked in nine hospitals and one nursing home across New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

"Most people believe he was killing since day one," Ruck said.

After "weird and strange things would happen," he said, various hospital administrations would tell Cullen that he can either be fired, or quit and find a job elsewhere.

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"They kept passing him off, and if we didn't get involved, I truly believe he would have been working somewhere else next," Ruck said.

Cullen admitted to 29 murders, but some experts believe he may have killed as many as 400 people in his 16-year career. He was convicted in 2006 and is serving 11 consecutive life sentences that total 397 years.

After receiving the call from the Somerset Medical Center pharmacist, Ruck and Dr. Steven Marcus, the hospital's medical director at the time, urged the facility's administration to go to the authorities. They refused.

Ruck and Marcus proceeded to have "several meetings" with the hospital's risk manager and chief medical officer.

"We played good cop, bad cop," Ruck explained. "I tried to keep them friendly and talking. He (Marcus) was playing the bad cop demanding they go to the authorities, which they continuously refused to do."

Hospital administration "stonewalled" attempts to bring the issue to the police at "every possible moment," according to Ruck.

Ruck started questioning his own sanity. "At some point, you wonder, 'Am I crazy? Is everybody else right and we're wrong?'" he said.

In the documentary, Ruck theorized that the administration was "afraid of being sued" and "losing a lot of money."

During a taped interview with investigators in the documentary, Cullen said that "I think they were worried about the publicity."

A turn in events finally occurred when detectives from the Somerset County Prosecutor's Office called Ruck in October 2003. The detectives asked Ruck about digoxin.

"I knew what they were talking about before they even said it," Ruck said. "The first words out of my mouth were, 'Oh, you're talking about Somerset Medical Center.'"

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There was “absolute dead silence,” he said. When the detective asked what Ruck was talking about, he said, “We’ve been telling them (the hospital) that they have a murderer on their hands for a while now.”

Just 15 minutes later, the detectives were sitting in Ruck’s office.

“If it wasn’t for that phone call, there’s a potential that the case would have been dropped because the medical center people weren’t cooperating,” Ruck said.

“If that detective did not call us...who knows?” he continued. “That’s the scary part.”

For about a year, Ruck and his poison control center colleagues were meeting with lawyers on a regular basis.

“It was a very, very difficult time professionally and emotionally for a lot of us that were involved with this case,” Ruck said.

The Cullen case has left Ruck with a “hair trigger.”

“When something doesn’t make sense, we jump on it,” he said.

While Ruck is glad he and his colleagues got involved, the medical center’s refusal to act has left a sour taste in his mouth.

“He probably murdered quite a few more people from the time we told them to go to the authorities to the time the authorities got involved,” he said.

“I’m glad we stopped him, I’m glad they called us, and I’m glad that we got involved,” he continued. “Do I wish it never happened? Absolutely.”

The question still remains, could this happen again somewhere? The answer is “yes,” according to Ruck.

“We all have a responsibility to look out for each other, look out for our loved ones and for our patients,” Ruck said. “If you see or suspect something, say something.”

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