

A baby's dignity

■ **Mom of premature infant whose body was found in the hospital's linen service days later sues for negligence**

BY ANN GIVENS
STAFF WRITER

Lying in the maternity ward after her only child had been taken dead from her arms and carried to the hospital morgue, Verna Uptigrow thought she had seen the lowest moment of her life.

But after arriving home from South Nassau Communities Hospital three days later, Uptigrow got a call from her obstetrician that added to her already unbearable pain.

"He said there's been a mishap," she said. "Somehow my daughter's body got put in the laundry."

This week, Uptigrow filed a civil lawsuit against the Oceanside hospital, charging that staff there was careless with the body of little Izabella Rosa Pinckney, who weighed less than a pound when she was born four months premature on Feb. 19. The lawsuit seeks unspecified damages from the hospital.

"It's not about money," said Uptigrow, 35, of Queens Village, tenderly touching the box of her daughter's ashes, and the tiny outfit she wore at the hospital. "It's about justice for my daughter. It's about letting them know she was a human being and she had a family and they can't be negligent."

Nan Gerson, the hospital's vice president for external affairs, would not comment on the lawsuit. She has said in the past that the hospital "deeply regrets" what happened.



Uptigrow's attorney, Dan Flanzig of Mineola, said the most important thing now is to make sure this never happens again.

"Every hospital has a protocol when something like this happens, and South Nassau has a protocol that it didn't follow in this case," he said.

Sitting in Flanzig's office yesterday, Uptigrow set the tiny box of her daughter's ashes on the table in front of her as she told of her surprise at learning that she was more than three months pregnant last December.

"The doctor handed me the positive pregnancy test and said, 'Now put this in your pocketbook, because you're going to be somebody's mother,'" Uptigrow recalled with a smile.

Over the next two months,

"I got to hold her. I got to feel her breath on my upper lip," said Uptigrow, a food service worker at the Bronx Psychiatric Center. "Then she passed."

Hospital staff took Izabella's tiny body away, and brought it back a few minutes later, dressed in pajamas and a cap. The family took a few pictures together before Izabella was taken to the morgue. After that, Uptigrow spent the night in a far corner of the hospital's maternity ward, listening to other mothers' babies crying.

When Uptigrow left the hospital the next day, she had an eerie sensation.

"Something just didn't feel right," she said. "I kept saying, 'I don't want to leave my baby.' But I thought it was just me because I was going through a loss."

Uptigrow and her fiancée, Keric Pinckney of Queens, adjusted to the unexpected news and grew excited about it. Uptigrow's pregnancy was an easy one until Feb. 16, when she felt cramping and rushed to the hospital.

There, she learned that her uterus had ruptured. Doctors put her in a hospital bed with her feet up, but within 48 hours her water broke and she was forced to deliver.

There was never any hope for Izabella to survive outside the womb at that point — just 22 weeks in the womb, Uptigrow said. All she and Pinckney could do was try to treasure their daughter's half hour of life.

It turns out she was right. Nassau police, who launched an investigation after Izabella's body was found at Oceanside Linen Services on Feb. 21, said they believe a hospital worker probably didn't see Izabella beneath a pile of soiled linen in a refrigerated locker. She was found by a laundry worker sorting through linens.

"I'm still a mother," Uptigrow said yesterday. "I can't raise my daughter, but I can always love her. She'll always be part of my life."

She sighed, and added: "But getting past this — that's going to take a lot of praying, and a lot of holding on."