Del Norte Triplicate NEWS

Sexual Assault Victims Allegedly Denied Medical Care at Sutter Coast Hospital

By Linda Sutter October 23, 2026

CRESCENT CITY, CA (MPG) - Allegations that Sutter Coast Hospital emergency room physicians refused recommended medical testing and treatment for sexual assault victims, including children, have raised serious questions about patient safety, medical accountability and the hospital's compliance with state and federal laws.

The allegations were presented July 28 before the Del Norte Healthcare District Board of Directors by Del Norte County Sheriff's Detective Maia Mello, a member of the county's multidisciplinary Sexual Assault Response Team (SART).

According to official meeting minutes, Mello described incidents involving victims who allegedly received inadequate medical care despite visible injuries and symptoms requiring attention.

Among the most disturbing was the case of a five-year-old child brought to the emergency room with suspected physical and sexual abuse indicators.

Mello reported that the attending physician refused timely diagnostic testing and treatment, resulting in the child's discharge with at least one untreated condition she believed fell under the federal Emergency Medical Treatment and Labor Act (EMTALA).

According to Mello, the physician told a sexual assault nurse examiner that he did not want to be subpoenaed and suggested obtaining follow-up care through an outpatient provider.

Mello further alleged that the physician disregarded recommended diagnostic procedures for the child's visible injuries.

In another case, an adolescent reporting possible sexual assault and accompanying symptoms was allegedly denied testing. The examining physician reportedly questioned whether the child had actually been raped.

A third patient reportedly returned to the emergency department five times because recommended diagnostic testing for visible injuries had not been provided.

Mello informed the board that all three cases involved sufficient evidence for criminal charges against the alleged perpetrators.

She further explained that the problems were not recent, describing documentation extending back years and efforts to improve cooperation with hospital emergency physicians.

Federal Law and Medical

Responsibilities

E M TA L A r e q u i r e s M e d i c a r e - participating hospitals with emergency departments to provide appropriate medical screening examinations to determine whether an emergency medical condition exists and, when necessary, provide stabilizing treatment or an appropriate transfer.

California Penal Code Section 13823.11 also establishes standards addressing medical examinations and evidence collection involving sexual assault victims.

Whether individual incidents violated these requirements has not been established through a regulatory finding in the available records.

However, disagreements over forensic examinations or investigative procedures do not eliminate a hospital's independent emergency medical screening and stabilization obligations.

Hospital Administration

Acknowledges Concerns

During the July meeting, Sutter Coast Hospital CEO Mike Lane expressed frustration over the allegations and acknowledged that corrective measures were necessary.

"I can't tell you how upset I am at the physician that would do this," Lane told board members.

Lane stated that discussions were underway involving County Supervisor Valerie Starkey, the District Attorney and other officials to address the concerns.

Healthcare District Director David Mason also raised concerns regarding compassionate treatment of vulnerable emergency room patients, describing an incident involving a homeless individual who allegedly received inadequate assistance.

Mello compared the local situation with Sutter Lakeside Hospital, where she reported that emergency physicians and sexual assault examiners follow coordinated procedures for testing, treatment and follow-up care.

Supervisor Responds to Published Report

Following an October 12 article published by Redwood Voice Community News, Supervisor Starkey issued a statement criticizing the reporting for omitting ongoing efforts to address the allegations.

Starkey said the North Coast Rape Crisis Council contacted her before Mello publicly addressed the Healthcare District.

She reported participating in at least three meetings with the involved parties to clarify medical procedures, responsibilities and potential solutions.

According to Starkey, those discussions identified differences between services requested by SART and procedures Sutter Coast Hospital physicians are required to follow.

She further confirmed that a memorandum of understanding (MOU) intended to establish clearer responsibilities remains under development and requires legal review.

Starkey also criticized the article for naming her without contacting her for comment.

Although the supervisor's statement provides additional information about ongoing discussions, it does not establish whether emergency department procedures have changed or whether specific corrective measures have been implemented.

Starkey acknowledged that the concerns remain unresolved.

Meetings Are Not the Same as

Corrective Action

Nearly three months after Mello's public testimony, significant questions remain.

What specific medical procedures have changed? Have emergency physicians received additional training? Were the incidents independently reviewed? What safeguards currently protect patients while the proposed agreement remains unfinished?

Perhaps most importantly, what has been done to prevent another child or adult from experiencing the alleged treatment described before the Healthcare District?

In the October 12 Redwood Voice report, Healthcare District Board President Dr. Kevin Caldwell indicated that officials were seeking written agreements involving hospital administrators, SART representatives and the emergency physicians' organization.

The matter is expected to return before the Healthcare District Board on Oct. 27.

For sexual assault victims, timely medical attention can be critical to identifying injuries, preventing complications and preserving evidence.

The issue now extends beyond whether officials are discussing solutions. The public needs to know whether meaningful protections have been implemented.

For a community dependent upon its local hospital for emergency medical services, those answers are essential.