

Ch 4 – A 36 year old man with chest pain

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The story of Jonathan began as an EM RAP episode and was released in January 2009. Compiling the information was time consuming, but it slowly came together with interviews of his family, his attorney, newspaper articles, and information from the freedom of information act. The process took months and when I found the chairman of the ED for the initial visit, Tim Whiteside (who did not see the patient) I knew we would have enough to discuss this case. I should note that the attorneys did not allow Mr. Larson, Jonathan's dad, to discuss any elements of the case as this was part of the settlement agreement. It was an honor to speak with this gentleman.

I also got help from Jonathan Martin , with the National Marfan's Foundation, who sent me video tapes from newsprograms at the time of the death. We had many conversations and he was very supportive of the project.

I even found the name of the initial ED doctor and spoke with him on the phone, but after a few minutes, when he discovered the reason for my call, he told me there was an emergency and had to get off the phone right away. I was never able to get in touch with him again.

The long, rambling intro was shortened for an audio presentation by my cousin Sora Newman, who travels around the country coaching NPR folks on how to best present on the program.

The EM RAP program ended with a song of Jonathan's. I have listened to this episode many times and get choked up each time...

EM RAP PANEL:

1. **Ryan Longstreth, MD FACEP** - Co-author Bouncebacks! and ED attending Mt. Carmel St. Ann's
2. **Greg Henry, MD FACEP** – Professor emergency medicine Univ. of Michigan, Past president ACEP, and CEO Medical Practice Risk Assessment
3. **Amal Mattu, MD, FAAEM, FACEP**, Director Emergency Medicine Residency Program Univ. of Maryland School of Medicine

4. **Tim Whiteside, MD** – (double boarded in EM/IM) - ED director Cabrini in 1996 – did not have direct patient contact but was named in lawsuit and very familiar with case. Heads performance improvement Hawaii Emergency Physicians Associates
5. **Greg Rankin, JD**, - Managing partner at Lane Alton & Horst in Columbus, Ohio with 30 years of medical practice defense. Recognized in 2009 edition of The Best Lawyers in America in the specialty of medical malpractice
6. **Diane Sixsmith, MD, MPH, FACEP**, Chairman Dept. Emergency Medicine New York Hospital Queens and Asst. Professor of Emergency Medicine, Weill Medical College of Cornell University and expert witness for the state with NY Office of Professional Misconduct
7. **Rob Rogers, MD, FACEP, FAAEM, FACP** – Assistant Professor, Univ. of Maryland School of Medicine
8. **Mel Herbert, MBBS (MD) BmedSci, FACEP** – Editor EM RAP, Associate Professor of Clinical Emergency Medicine, USC Keck School of Medicine, Department of Emergency Medicine, LAC & USC Medical Center, Los Angeles, California
9. **Mike Weinstock, MD** – Clinical Associate Professor Dept. Emergency Medicine Ohio State University, ED attending and director of medical education Mt. Carmel St. Ann's ED, Risk management editor EM RAP

NYT article Mel Gussow Jan. 26 Obituary

December 13, 1996

ON THE EVE OF A NEW LIFE, AN UNTIMELY DEATH

– NY TIMES

By LAWRENCE VAN GELDER

Jonathan Larson, who created the hit rock opera "Rent," died as he was about to achieve success. Following is an account of the last days of his life and the first days of his production, assembled from the accounts of co-workers (in italic print) and from a New York State Department of Health case report released yesterday.

Sunday, Jan. 21, 1996

At the New York Theater Workshop between the Bowery and Second Avenue in the East Village, "Rent" is in the final, frantic days of rehearsal before previews begin. In theater terminology, the period is "10-out-of-12 days," when the actors may be kept at work for 10 hours out of a maximum of 12. At the New York Theater Workshop, this is a day when lighting, sound, costumes, props, sets are being integrated into the production.

6:30 P.M.: Cast and crew return after a dinner break to continue rehearsing the second act. The song "Seasons of Love" is being heard through the sound system for the first time. Jonathan Larson, who is seeing his musical -- a

contemporary American version of the Puccini opera "La Boheme" -- come to life seven years after it was conceived, is not feeling well and nearly collapses backstage.

6:45 P.M.: Mr. Larson is taken by ambulance to the Cabrini Medical Center emergency room at 227 East 19th Street. After eating dinner and reportedly smoking a small amount of marijuana, he had complained of severe chest pain, shortness of breath and dizziness. A friend remembers him saying, "My chest is killing me." Paramedics make a presumptive diagnosis: "pleuritic chest pain," pain worsened by breathing.

7 P.M.: An emergency room physician takes and reviews an electrocardiogram. A second emergency room physician examines Mr. Larson. In his notes, he says, "no cardiac disease . . . just finished producing a play . . . increased stress." X-rays are taken.

8 P.M.: Mr. Larson complains of dizziness and shortness of breath. A nurse's notes report him saying, "I can't take a breath." A friend asks the doctor about Mr. Larson's condition and says he is told: "I can't find anything wrong. You'll be out of here in one hour since I want to pump his stomach." Mr. Larson is given pain medication. Food is drained from his stomach.

10:15 P.M.: Mr. Larson is given 50 grains of charcoal to absorb toxins. He is instructed to take a bland diet for 24 hours and told to return to the emergency room if necessary. He returns home.

Monday, Jan. 22

In the morning, a radiologist at Cabrini reviews the chest X-rays, which he says are accompanied by paperwork that lists "pain" under a heading of clinical history. He finds the X-rays normal. Mr. Larson's roommate says he continues to feel discomfort.

In the theater, Monday is traditionally a day off, but some of the technical staff is working on "Rent." Around the New York Theater Workshop, the feeling is that it is a good thing Mr. Larson can stay home and rest.

Early afternoon: James C. Nicola, the artistic director of the workshop, speaks to Mr. Larson by phone. Mr. Larson seems better.

Tuesday, Jan. 23

1 P.M.: Another 10-out-of-12 day. Technical rehearsals resume.

4 or 4:30 P.M.: In a phone conversation, Mr. Larson tells Mr. Nicola that doctors have told him he has a virus or a flu, and that he should stay home.

11 P.M. Rehearsals end.

About 11 P.M.: Mr. Larson is taken by a friend to the emergency room at St. Vincent's Hospital and Medical Center, at Seventh Avenue and West 11th Street in Greenwich Village, after complaining of "not feeling right," a low-grade fever and chest pain. A triage nurse documents his chief complaint as "right chest pain."

The nurse notes that the patient describes the pain as possible heartburn and says he was seen at Cabrini for the same symptoms two nights earlier. The patient rates the severity of the pain at 7 on a scale of 10. The nurse classifies the case as urgent, but does not speak with a physician about the vital-sign readings.

Wednesday, Jan. 24

12:40 A.M.: Mr. Larson is seen by an emergency room physician. The physician notes that the patient complains of "sharp inspiratory right-sided chest pain." A chest X-ray and electrocardiogram are ordered. The physician interprets the chest X-rays and EKG as normal. Mr. Larson's condition is diagnosed as viral syndrome and he is discharged in "improved" condition.

During the cab ride home, Mr. Larson complains of pain and tightness in the chest. "Nothing has changed," he is reported to have said. He arrives home in the early morning hours. Later in the morning, a radiologist at St. Vincent's interprets the X-rays as essentially normal. He reports: "Heart size is at upper limit of normal." He does not find any problem that requires a recall of the patient. A cardiologist reads the EKG and indicates a question of myocardial infarction, a heart attack. There is no evidence of any follow-up.

Mr. Larson tells his father he still has chest pain, pain in his lower back and low-grade fever.

7:30 P.M.: Mr. Larson, looking pale and exhausted, arrives at the theater.

8 P.M.: At the 150-seat theater, the curtain rises on the first complete performance ever of "Rent."

Midnight: In an interview with a New York Times reporter, he speaks of his need to respond in some way to his friends coping with AIDS and to celebrate the lives of people who have died young.

Thursday, Jan. 25

12:10 A.M.: His interview completed, Mr. Larson drops in on a production meeting at the theater.

12:30 A.M.: Looking pale and exhausted, Mr. Larson leaves the theater in a cab, planning to meet with Mr. Nicola and Michael Greif, the show's director, at 9 A.M. at the Time Cafe at Lafayette and Third Streets.

After 12:30 A.M.: Mr. Larson arrives home.

1 or 1:30 A.M.: At the theater, the production meeting ends.

About 3:30 A.M.: Mr. Larson's roommate arrives home. Mr. Larson is lying on the kitchen floor. He is unresponsive. 911 is called. Emergency Medical Service responds. Mr. Larson is declared dead. He is 35 years old. His body is removed later by the Medical Examiner's office.

Noon: The first preview of "Rent" is canceled after news of Mr. Larson's death reaches the theater.

Friday, Jan. 26

An autopsy is performed. The cause of death is listed as "aortic dissection due to cystic medial degeneration of unknown etiology" -- a tear in the body's main blood vessel. Toxicology results are negative for all substances.

8 p.m. The curtain rises on the first preview.

Tuesday, Feb. 13

"Rent" opens.

Wednesday, Feb. 14

Glowing reviews begin to appear. The six-week run sells out immediately. In the months to come, "Rent" will move to Broadway. The show will win four Tony awards, including the prize for best musical, and Jonathan Larson will win the Pulitzer Prize for drama, posthumously.

Larson 35 years old when died

STATE FAULTS HOSPS FOR 'RENT' TRAGEDY

– NY Daily News

By JOE NICHOLSON and ANNE E. KORNBLUT - Friday, December 13th 1996, 2:01AM

The author of the hit musical "Rent" was twice misdiagnosed and sent home from hospitals to die, just days before he was about to unveil the work that brought him international acclaim, state health officials said yesterday.

As the main artery from his heart was about to burst, Jonathan Larson went to two of the city's most prestigious hospitals with excruciating chest pains, dizziness and shortness of breath.

But doctors told him he had food poisoning or a viral syndrome and sent Larson, 35, home, where he died of an aortic aneurysm on his kitchen floor.

Larson's health problems were "not correctly diagnosed and inappropriately treated" at Cabrini Medical Center and St. Vincent's Medical Center, investigators said.

The hospitals were hit with unusual fines totaling \$16,000 after the state's four-month probe, and doctors at both hospitals were referred for investigation by the state's Office of Professional Medical Conduct.

"Mr. Larson's condition was misdiagnosed at both hospitals," State Health Commissioner Dr. Barbara DeBuono said yesterday. "We do have concerns about the appropriateness and medical soundness of the treatment Mr. Larson received in their emergency rooms."

An autopsy showed Larson had a tear of more than 12 inches in his aorta from an aneurysm, which caused his death Jan. 25 the night of the final rehearsal for "Rent."

The musical, seven years in the making, went on to win the Tony Award and Pulitzer Prize for drama in the months following Larson's death.

In the days before "Rent" debuted, however, when Larson was still an unknown artist living in a small West Village apartment, he began showing signs of heart trouble and visited the two hospitals charged in yesterday's probe.

Cabrini Medical Center, the E. 19th St. hospital where Larson was taken by ambulance Jan. 21, has been slapped with a \$10,000 fine.

Among its errors, state officials said, was sending Larson home with a diagnosis of food poisoning.

Cabrini also pumped his stomach and treated him with a painkiller, toradol a medicine inappropriate even for food poisoning that compounded the problems by camouflaging symptoms, state officials said.

And the radiologist who examined Larson's X-rays the next day found nothing wrong, though some medical experts brought in by the state said they showed an enlarged heart and extended aorta more typical of someone twice Larson's age.

The next day, Larson visited St. Vincent's Medical Center, where doctors gave him another X-ray and an EKG, yet misdiagnosed him with a viral syndrome.

St. Vincent's which released Larson in an "improved" condition the day before his death received a smaller fine of \$6,000. The hospitals issued public statements yesterday denying any negligence and questioned the state report.

"A number of deficiencies exist between the department's report and the medical facts in this case," said a statement from St. Vincent's Medical Center. "Our exhaustive review indicates that Mr. Larson's evaluation at St. Vincent's was medically thorough and appropriate."

DeBuono conceded that diagnosing the aortic aneurysm "would pose a challenge to the best clinician," particularly because of Larson's young age and lack of history.

Larson's sister, who with her family has filed a \$250 million negligence lawsuit against both hospitals, was reported to be too distraught to comment yesterday.

"On the one hand, she is gratified that an independent investigation found that the hospital's care was deficient," said family attorney David Taback.

"But at the same time, she is saddened because it is further confirmation that her brother shouldn't have died," he said.

Larson's parents were unavailable for comment.

The musical a modern version of "La Boheme" depicting life on the lower East Side played to sellout performances at the New York Theater Workshop before it moved to Broadway's Nederlander Theater, where it won prestigious Tony and New York Drama Critics' Circle awards.

Three months after Larson's death, "Rent" won the 1996 Pulitzer Prize.

LARSON'S LAST DAYS

Jan. 21, 6:45 p.m.: Jonathan Larson develops chest pain, shortness of breath and dizziness after dinner. Goes to Cabrini Medical Center emergency room and tells friend, "My chest is killing me."

Jan. 21, 10:15 p.m.: Doctors discharge Larson with probable food poisoning diagnosis after an EKG and X-rays. They pump his stomach, give him a painkiller and tell him to stick to a bland diet for 24 hours.

Jan. 22: Larson remains at home, telling roommate he feels discomfort.

Jan. 23: Larson complains of "not feeling right" because of chest pain and fever.

Jan. 23, 11 p.m.: Friend brings Larson to St. Vincent's Medical Center emergency room, where his chest pain is rated 7 in severity on a scale of 10. Nurse lists case as urgent.

Jan. 24, 12:40 a.m.: Emergency room doctor examines Larson and performs chest X-ray and EKG. Diagnosed with viral syndrome and discharged in "improved" condition.

Jan. 24: Larson tells his father he has chest and lower back pain and a low-grade fever. Attends dress rehearsal for his show.

Jan. 25, 12:30 a.m.: Arrives home from rehearsal.

Jan. 25, 3:30 a.m.: Roommate finds Larson dead on the kitchen floor.

ON ANNIVERSARY OF A SON'S DEATH, CONTRACTS AND AWARDS ARE SMALL COMFORT

- NEW YORK TIMES

By RACHEL L. SWARNS

Published: January 26, 1997

Allan Larson buries his grief in the stacks of paper towering precariously on his desk, in the pages of the book about his lost son that is to be published soon, in the fine print of the contract for the forthcoming film about his son's life, and in the cards and letters from fans overwhelmed by his son's creation, the hit musical "Rent."

And sometimes at night, in the hazy place between wakefulness and sleep, he finds himself believing that his son is still alive, that the telephone will ring and that Jonathan Larson, the curly-haired, ebullient playwright and composer, will be on the line, humming the riff of a newly penned song.

"I have my moments, when I still can't believe, because it shouldn't be," said Mr. Larson in an interview yesterday, on the one-year anniversary of his son's death.

"But you wake up and it's the same nightmare," said Mr. Larson, who flew to New York from New Mexico with his wife, Nanette, to spend the day with the cast of the musical. "This year has been a roller-coaster ride from hell, and it continues to this day."

Jonathan Larson, 35, was found dead on Jan. 25, 1996, one day before his rock opera began previews at the New York Theater Workshop in the East Village. And in the year since his death, he has been showered with the accolades he had always dreamed of.

He won the Pulitzer Prize for drama, posthumously. His show garnered four Tony Awards, including the prize for best musical. And he became beloved by the hundreds of theatergoers who sit and sleep outside the theater to buy tickets to "Rent," which has moved to Broadway and is often sold out.

His death, untimely and unanticipated, was all the more painful because it did not have to happen. Twice during the last week of his life, the young playwright was rushed to Manhattan emergency rooms complaining of chest pains. Twice, doctors failed to diagnose the potentially treatable ailment that killed him, the New York State Health Department determined.

In December, the department imposed a \$10,000 fine on Cabrini Medical Center, where doctors said Mr. Larson was suffering from food poisoning. It imposed a \$6,000 fine on St. Vincent's Hospital and Medical Center, where doctors said he had a virus.

In fact, Mr. Larson suffered from a tear more than a foot long in his aorta, the main artery carrying blood from the heart to other organs. Lawyers representing his estate have filed a medical malpractice lawsuit against the hospitals, which have maintained that they offered Mr. Larson adequate care.

Last night, about 100 friends and relatives commemorated his death. Gathered on the stage of the Nederlander Theater, where the show is performed, they sang the anthem, "Seasons of Love."

The actors in "Rent," a contemporary American version of the Puccini opera "La Boheme," have had to get used to working without him. But some say they still feel his presence.

"Every time there's an empty seat in the theater, we like to think that Jonathan's there," said Anthony Rapp, the actor who plays the character Mark.

"Most people, when they're gone, it's hard to find ways to make them present," he said. "But we're with Jonathan every day, through his music and his words and the world he created."

It has been more difficult for his family. Overwhelmed by her grief, his older sister, Julie Larson McCollum, quit her job as a producer of commercials in April. His mother, Nanette, still cannot bear to read the many articles written about her son. And his father, a 71-year-old retired direct marketer, often finds himself bursting into tears at odd moments.

"I was never a crier, but now I find I can be sent into paroxysms of tears," said the elder Mr. Larson, his eyes watering as he sipped a cup of coffee in a diner yesterday. "But there's so much to do now in connection with this thing that Jonathan has become. And I'm busier than I ever was, reading manuscripts, reading contracts, making phone calls. That helps."

There is that book in the works and the possible movie deal with the director Martin Scorsese, and the Library of Congress wants to catalogue his son's compositions, Mr. Larson said.

The family has also created the Jonathan Larson Performing Arts Foundation to keep struggling artists working.

Yesterday, before the stage gathering, the actors shared their memories of the young playwright, who grew up in White Plains pounding on the family piano.

"His big eyes, his smile, his laugh, his big ears, his curly hair, the way he always looked like he was up to some mischief, that's what I remember," said Daphne Rubin-Vega, who plays the role of Mimi in the musical.

"A year ago today, we just sat there on the stage, huddled together," she said. "We spoke. We cried. And today we want to be together."

Mr. Larson's father, who scattered some of his son's ashes on Broadway, said he could think of no better place to spend the day than with the actors.

"You want to be with family," he said. "They're family now."

News Releases Archive

FAMILY MEMBERS AFFECTED BY MARFAN SYNDROME DEATHS WORK FOR AWARENESS

From Associated Press, January 30, 2001 by Joe Stange

The disorder killed a celebrated playwright and possibly afflicted Abraham Lincoln. But advocates say it's not easy to get doctors to pay proper attention to Marfan syndrome - partly because the disorder is so hard to spot.

Involved in the efforts to get emergency rooms to take note are a St. Louis doctor who personally felt the impact when the disorder went undiagnosed, and a father whose playwright son gained world fame only after Marfan took his life.

The physical traits of someone with Marfan syndrome are quite common, making it more difficult for doctors to recognize. Those affected are often tall, loose-jointed, with an unusually lanky frame. Nearsightedness or other eye problems also are common.

The genetic disorder affects connective tissue, the basic substance that holds together blood vessels, heart valves, cartilage, tendons and other structures.

In many cases, the aorta, the heart's main artery, gradually becomes enlarged, with thinner walls, until it eventually tears or ruptures. If those cases are not discovered in time, the consequences are fatal.

In Jonathan Larson's case, it took an autopsy to find the problem.

It was about five years ago that tragedy disrupted Allen Larson's quiet retirement in New Mexico. On a Saturday night in January 1996, Larson's son, Jonathan, was in New York overseeing rehearsals for "Rent" - the musical he had written after 10 years of waiting tables - when he was struck by severe chest pains.

Larson was rushed to a New York City emergency room, where doctors diagnosed him with food poisoning and sent him home. Two days later, still suffering from chest pains, Larson was taken to another emergency room. He was again sent home after doctors said he had the flu.

Hours later, at 35, Jonathan Larson was dead. His dreams of fame on Broadway were fulfilled only after life; "Rent" garnered four Tony awards and a Pulitzer prize.

If doctors had investigated his chest pains further, his family contends, Larson might still be writing today. An autopsy revealed that Larson died of a ruptured aorta caused by Marfan syndrome.

Allen Larson, 75, said it's difficult to know how many other people have died because of misdiagnosis - but he's heard from some of their families, who sometimes call him to share their stories.

"The reality is, in the case of chest pains like Jonathan's, in 48 hours half the people who suffer those will be dead," Larson said. "So it's critical that they get immediate attention."

In St. Louis, **Dr. Alan Braverman** has heard stories like Larson's on many occasions. His own family's story is not so different. Marfan took the life of Braverman's father at age 47, though at the time the family knew only that his heart valve had ruptured.

Soon after, when Braverman was in medical school, he heard a heart murmur while examining his brother. That led to a diagnosis of Marfan syndrome, which the family and doctors soon realized was what killed his father. Braverman's brother, at 41 and after two heart surgeries, survives because he was diagnosed.

Braverman, 40, would rather talk about the symptoms of the disorder than the events that fuel his mission to make the public more aware of it. "It's personal," he said. "Very personal. But I think that's extremely helpful when I talk to people and families about Marfan syndrome."

These days, Braverman squeezes in "15 hours of work into 12-hour days" as a physician and researcher at the **Washington University School of Medicine** in St. Louis. He heads the Marfan Syndrome Clinic at Barnes-Jewish Hospital, and has become one of the country's leading authorities on the condition.

Both Braverman and Larson are working for a campaign by the National Marfan Foundation to bring more public attention to the disorder. Their biggest task is to educate emergency rooms on how to spot the syndrome, which can be difficult to diagnose.

Larson is paying for the production of videos that doctors will use for continuing medical education, required for most physicians to keep their licenses. The money is coming from wrongful death lawsuits the Larsons won against the two hospitals that misdiagnosed Jonathan.

The New York-based National Marfan Foundation, of which Braverman is a board member, estimates that more than 200,000 people in the United States are affected by Marfan or similar connective tissue disorders. The foundation said that tens of thousands likely go undiagnosed.

Braverman's clinic in St. Louis each year attracts about 100 patients who have or suspect they have the syndrome. Also, he and the clinic keep tabs on about 75 patients they know to have Marfan.

Nationally, about one person in 5,000 has the syndrome, Braverman said. If it's diagnosed, and the person's aortic valves are watched and replaced when needed, a Marfan patient can live well into their 70s, he said.

Many afflicted by Marfan never know until, like Jonathan Larson and Braverman's father, they take a trip to the emergency room.

In those cases, "about 85 percent survive if they have emergency surgery," Braverman said. "If it's unrecognized, it's uniformly fatal."

“THANK YOU, JONATHAN LARSON”

JONATHAN LARSON (*Book, Music, Lyrics*) received the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *Rent*. *Rent* received four 1996 Tony Awards (including Best Musical and two to Mr. Larson-Best Book of a Musical and Best Score of a Musical); six drama Desk Awards (including Best Musical, Best Book of a Musical, Best Music and Best Lyrics); Best Musical Awards from the New York Drama Critics Circle and the Outer Critics Circle (Off-Broadway); and three Obie Awards (including Outstanding Book, Music and Lyrics). Previously, he received the Richard Rodgers Production Award, the Richard Rodgers Development Grant, the Stephen Sondheim Award and the Gilman & Gonzalez-Falla Theatre Foundation's Commendation Award.

Earlier work includes *Superbia; tick, tick...BOOM!*; the music for *J.P. Morgan Saves the Nation*; and numerous individual numbers. He also wrote music for "Sesame Street" and the children's book-cassettes *An American Tail* and *Land Before Time* as well as for Rolling Stone magazine publisher Jann Wenner. He conceived and directed a children's video, *Away We Go!*, for which he wrote four songs. *Rent* had its world premiere on February 13, 1996 at New York Theatre Workshop and opened at Broadway's Nederlander Theatre on April 29, 1996. Mr. Larson died unexpectedly of an undiagnosed aortic aneurysm, believed to have been caused by Marfan Syndrome, on January 25, 1996. It was ten days before his 36th birthday.

The rock opera's opening night ended with no applause at the New York Theatre Workshop on Jan. 26, 1996.

Near-infinite silence engulfed the theatre. The audience sat in silence. The cast sat in silence. The crew sat in silence. The band sat in silence. An unidentified voice sliced the silence, "Thank you, Jonathan Larson." Rewind: The night was Jan. 25, 1996, the night of *Rent*'s final, off-Broadway dress rehearsal, composer Jonathan Larson went to

his So-Ho apartment and made some tea. Larson had been complaining of chest pains that day, and went to two

hospitals who told him that it was either stress or the flu. While making his tea, he fell to the floor and died of an undiagnosed aortic aneurysm caused by Marfan Syndrome. It was ten days before his 36th birthday. "It took my brother fifteen years of really hard work to become an overnight sensation," said Larson's sister, Julie Larson McCollum in the book *RENT* by Jonathan Larson. The idea of *Rent* began in 1988 when playwright Bill Aronson wanted to modernize Giacomo Puccini's *La Bohème*, an opera written in 1896. A year later, Aronson agreed to take Larson along for the challenge to score his piece. Larson came up with the title *Rent*, but the two had differences on how the story should be written and could not resolve them. In 1991, Larson asked Aronson if he could make *Rent* his own musical. Aronson agreed, and they made a mutual agreement that if the show went to Broadway they would share the proceeds.

Rent consumed Larson the rest of his life. Rather than strictly modernizing Puccini's piece, Larson also wanted to focus on the book that *La Bohème* was based on, *Scènes de la vie de Bohème* by Henri Murger. Hours a day, Larson would sit at his keyboard and write songs. He wanted to "merge the tradition of the musical theatre with the 1990s music and the sensibility of young people raised with MTV, film technology, and rapidly changing social values."

Larson sought to make the 90s generation of the 60s musical *Hair*, a musical about living life care-free, shedding the past, and coping with the dawning of a new age, with a potpourri of musical genres. Living in an apartment no bigger than a large closet, where the shower was in the kitchen, Larson supported himself as a waiter at the Moondance Diner. He would work on the weekends and make enough tips and money so he could put every piece of himself into his musical. "He hated it," said friend Eddie Rosenstein of Larson's job as a waiter. "He didn't want to [be a waiter], and he was thrilled when [a musical opportunity] came up and he could take a hiatus." While writing and composing *Rent*, Larson dabbled in other musical projects including, what started as a one-man show entitled *Boho Days*, but became a tri-cast show, and off-Broadway musical re-entitled *tick, tick...BOOM!*, which was produced in 2001, six years after his death. Larson worked on songs for TV shows such as *Sesame Street* and a few cabarets. He also had his own show in the early 80s for children called *Away We Go!* Finally, Larson's musical *Rent* was to be produced at a workshop in New York called the New York Theatre Workshop in 1993. Larson was ecstatic, he could finally get out of the diner. He sent his dad, Al Larson, a note: "Dear Dad, I quit work. Love, Jon." "Rent started as a staged reading [...] followed by a studio production that played a three-week run a year later," according to www.wikipedia.org. Some days during rehearsal, Larson and *Rent*'s director, Michael Grief, would have disputes about what was and wasn't working in the show, whether it was song or story related. Grief would threaten to walk away from the project, but Larson would not let him. "You can't do this to me, this is my baby!" Larson would cry with a furrowed brow. He'd storm home, and the next day he would have a new song written. Larson's musical is not just about living in the moment, it's about coping with life and pursuing dreams for life satisfaction, much like Larson did himself. He truly changed the musical theatre. "I never listened to musicals before *Rent*," said Kris Fossett, 20, a journalism and theatre major at DCCC. "[*Rent*] showed me that musicals aren't boring." Larson's musical was "awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, the Tony Awards for Best Musical, Best Book of a Musical, and Best Score of a Musical, the Drama Desks for Best Musical, Best Book of a Musical, and Best Lyrics the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Musical, the Outer Critics Circle Award for Best Musical in the Off-Broadway category, and three Obie Awards for Outstanding Book, Outstanding Lyrics and Outstanding Music" all in 1996, according to wikipedia.org. Larson McCollum accepted her younger brother's Tony award for Best Musical in 1996. "My brother Jonathan loved musical theater. He dreamed of creating a youthful, passionate, pertinent piece that would bring a new generation to the theater, so they would find as much joy in it as he did. That became *Rent*. Thank you all for embracing *Rent*, and with it, my brother, Jonathan." Thank you, Jonathan Larson. Contact Shane R. Toogood at

communitarian_dccc@hotmail.com. Please write "Shane R. Toogood" in the subject box. Some information was provided by the World Wide Web, the feature-length documentary "No Day But Today," and the books *The Creative Spirit* by Stephanie Arnold, and *RENT* by Jonathan Larson Interviews and Text by Evelyn McDonnell with Katherine

Silberger.

[SEGMENT BREAK] [EOF999]

ANNOUNCER

PrimeTime continues. Now, from TV 1 in New York, Diane Sawyer.

DIANE SAWYER

'When good men die, their goodness does not perish.' Those are the words of a Greek playwright, Euripides, and they resonate through our next story because it's about a playwright who struggled a lifetime to bring his vision to the stage. And then, just as Jonathan Larson's first major musical, Rent, was about to open, he died, never knowing his work would receive rave reviews, four Tony awards and the Pulitzer Prize. But there is another twist to this tragic plot. Tonight Cynthia McFadden retraces his last few days of life and explores some very disturbing questions about his death.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN, ABC NEWS LEGAL CORRESPONDENT

[VO] It was launched as the rock musical of the '90s. It is a version of the opera classic, La Boheme, but instead of Puccini's young Bohemians dying of tuberculosis in Paris, Jonathan Larson's Bohemians are struggling with AIDS in New York. Gentle metaphors for life lost too young blended with strong social themes proved a sure bet for a Pulitzer Prize and a handful of Tonys.

TONY AWARD PRESENTER

And the winner is Rent, music and lyrics, Jonathan Larson.

ANNOUNCER

Accepting for the late Jonathan Larson, his sister, Julie.

JULIE LARSON MCCOLLUM

You know, it took Jonny 15 years of really hard work to become an overnight sensation.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] As a tribute to her brother, Julie Larson McCollum shared the award with all those out there still struggling.

JULIE LARSON MCCOLLUM

Stay true to yourselves and to your dreaMs. I know they can come true. This is for you. Thank you.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] The story of Jonathan Larson's dreams begins in New York's Greenwich Village where the fledgling song writer lived amongst the disenfranchised about whom he wrote. He lived in this tattered four story walk up apartment, most noted for the bathtub stuck in the kitchen. In what he considered the artist's rite of passage, he waited tables by night at the Moondance Diner and wrote music all day - this song about the sheer joy of it.

JONATHAN LARSON

[singing] I thought, heck, what a way to spend the day! What a way to spend the day.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] Larson wrote song after song, all the while wrestling with self doubt. As Larson continued to struggle, it was a friend's courage facing HIV that inspired much of the music and lyrics that would one day become Rent. That friend was Matt O'Grady, his pal since age 7.

MATT O'GRADY

Jonathan was one of the first people I told I was HIV positive. It- it took a real toll on him. But what Jon helped me do was face it, through his work. He helped me really embrace it, to understand it, to look fear in the eye and to move forward.

SUPPORT GROUP LEADER

Please help them to know that they are surrounded by love and-

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] Although Larson did not have AIDS, another way he helped O'Grady move forward was to come here with him, to Friends in Deed, an HIV support group.

MATT O'GRADY

One night somebody had raised his hand and was, you know, experiencing a lot of physical pain and was in a lot of duress and on a lot of medication and felt like the quality of his life was crumbling. And he said, you know, 'Will I lose my dignity?' And Jon just took that phrase, that I don't even know who said it, and made it into a song.

CAST MEMBER

[singing] Will I lose my dignity? Will someone care? / Will I wake tomorrow from this nightmare?

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] This musical number and the 30 others that became Rent were all developed or refined here at the New York Theater Workshop, which Jonathan Larson had stumbled upon in the summer of '92 while riding his bicycle. Nancy Deikman is artistic director.

NANCY DEIKMAN

We worked on this for about four years. We workshopped it. He worked on it in the summer. He did drafts. He thought he was done. We told him he wasn't done. And that went on for a long time.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] Larson's friends were there for the long haul, too. Victoria Leacock was a college girlfriend who became a best friend.

VICTORIA LEACOCK

The way he'd work on a song is he'd- he'd write it. He'd call his four or five friends. He'd sing us the song on- if we're not home, on our answering machines.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] His sister, Julie-

JULIE LARSON MCCOLLUM

He always felt that, little by little, he was, you know, getting closer and closer and closer to his dream and to his goals.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] Finally, Jonathan Larson's Rent would be produced off Broadway his way.

JULIE LARSON MCCOLLUM

He was thrilled. I remember he called us up all the time when they were casting Rent. It was really important to him that the cast be young and passionate and sexy. Those were the things he kept saying. 'They've got to be young! They've got to be sexy! They've got to be passionate!' And he was just flying. He was so happy.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] So last November, after 15 years of waiting tables, the last seven of which he wrote Rent, Jonathan Larson retired from the Moondance Diner. His friends videotaped his last day.

JONATHAN LARSON

I'm making my last chocolate milkshake!

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] Sunday, January 21st-

MANDY MICHELLE

Rent had just moved from the rehearsal room next door into the theater and no one could stay away from the stage. It was so exciting. It was-

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] Mandy Michelle, who oversees the scripts, was sitting just a couple of seats away from Jonathan Larson.

MANDY MICHELLE

And they were on stage and they were rehearsing and they were doing 'Santa Fe.' And then Jonathan got up about 20 minutes later and walked around this aisle and to the back of the house.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

Jonathan Larson lay down here, on the floor at the back of the theater, with severe chest pains. He told those around him he thought he was having a heart attack. And eerily, as he waited for the ambulance to arrive, he'd listened to a rehearsal of his own song about dying young in America.

CAST MEMBER

[singing] Dying in America at the end of the millennium-

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] He was met at the emergency room of Cabrini Hospital by another close friend, Jonathan Burkhardt.

JONATHAN BURKHARDT

I got to Cabrini at about 7 o'clock and Jonathan had just been taken out of the ambulance and went into chest X rays. They performed an EKG and they put him on a gurney in the emergency ward. And he was laying flat on his back and he was breathing really hard and he was crying and he was completely freaked out and very scared. And he said, 'I have no idea.' He says, 'I can't believe this is happening. They think it might be food poisoning.' But the pain was clearly in his chest and he had great difficulty breathing- I mean, great difficulty breathing.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] Doctors at Cabrini decided Larson's EKG and chest X rays were normal. Still suspecting food poisoning, they pumped his stomach and sent him home. His roommate, Brian Carmody-

BRIAN CARMODY

I got in around 11:30. He was in bed, pretty pale, like a pale, off greenish kind of color he looked. Didn't look too healthy.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] And Larson was frightened.

BRIAN CARMODY

He asked me if I would sleep on the living room floor outside his room, and I set the alarm clock to wake every couple of hours.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

Monday Larson rested. Tuesday he developed a fever, and later that night his roommate brought him here, to the Saint Vincent's Hospital emergency room. Again Jonathan Burkhardt rushed to his side.

JONATHAN BURKHARDT

There was Jonathan, slumped over in a chair, kind of with his head in his hands, just completely out of it, white as a ghost, sweating and pissed off. And it's, like, you know, 'I just don't know what it is. I feel like shit, but they can't find anything and I just don't feel right.'

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] According to Saint Vincent's records, doctors there took more chest X rays and told him he probably had a virus.

JONATHAN BURKHARDT

But when he came out of the emergency room at Saint Vincent's, I said, 'Stop. How much of this is nerves?' And he goes, 'Well, it's part of it,' he says, 'but I just don't feel right.'

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

ednesday, January 24th, was to be the biggest day yet, the first full dress rehearsal for Rent.

NANCY DEIKMAN

At the end of the show, everyone leapt to their feet, which was a great moment for Jonathan and for all of us. And then he had an interview with The New York Times that night, so he nearly was whisked away.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] That interview would later bring great comfort to Jonathan's parents, Nanette and Alan Larson.

ALAN LARSON

He had his first ever interview with The New York Times, which is a big step up for a theater person. This gentleman told him he was confident he had a hit on his hands. His name is Anthony Tomasini, and I will bless him forever.

ANTHONY TOMASINI

The music was terrific. I could tell, you know, that the music was really tremendous.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] This is Jonathan Larson's voice from his New York Times interview, tape recorded that night here in the theater's box office. Larson talked of a bright future.

JONATHAN LARSON

I'm happy to say that other commissions are coming in, and I think I have a life as a composer!

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] And ever so prophetically explained the message of his play.

JONATHAN LARSON

It's not how many years you live, but how filling the time you spend here is.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] The writer was the last to see Jonathan Larson until Brian Carmody came home at 3:45 in the morning and found Larson lying on the floor. A boiled out kettle was burning on the stove and Carmody quickly phoned 911.

BRIAN CARMODY

And I opened his shirt and massaged his heart. The cops arrived almost straightaway. They took me downstairs. They knew straightaway. And I just asked them, 'Is he okay? Is he okay?' and eventually they told me 'No, he was dead.'

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] Shaking, Carmody asked the police if he could be the one to notify Larson's sister.

BRIAN CARMODY

I called Julie and I spoke- I just couldn't- I couldn't talk. I just didn't know what to say or- I spoke to Chuck, her husband.

ALAN LARSON

Some time between 4:00 and 5:00 in the morning, I got a phone call. Woke me up. It was my son in law from California.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

What did he say?

ALAN LARSON

'Jonny's dead.'

NANETTE LARSON

And at 8:30 in the morning we were on a plane heading east

ALAN LARSON

In the back of my mind, I kept disbelieving. I was going to get to New York and find Jonny- maybe he's in the hospital, maybe he's sick, but Jonny can't be dead.

DIANE SAWYER

But Jonathan Larson had died at the age of 35. And when we come back, Cynthia McFadden has some surprising details about his death and the conclusions his family has reached about the emergency room care he received. [Commercial break]

ANNOUNCER

Once again, from TV 1 in New York, Diane Sawyer.

DIANE SAWYER

After hearing of their son's death, Jonathan Larson's parents flew to New York from their home in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and learned that their son had died of an aneurysm. An aneurysm is a swelling of a blood vessel, and it can be lethal if the pressure causes the vessel to rupture. It can occur in many parts of the body, but in Jonathan Larson's case it happened in the aorta, which carries blood from the heart. Cynthia McFadden continues now with his family's search for answers about his death.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] We begin again the evening after Jonathan Larson died. Opening night was canceled, and instead Larson's parents and close friends assembled at the theater where the stunned cast of Rent offered not a performance, but a sing through of Larson's songs. [interviewing] Is there any particular song in the show that is tough for you to hear?

NANETTE LARSON

The song that gets to me the most is very early on and- because it- it brings Jonathan to me very close and that's the song-

ALAN LARSON

'One Song Glory.'

NANETTE LARSON

-called 'One Song Glory.'

CAST MEMBER

[singing] One song glory, one song before I go glory / One song to leave behind-

NANETTE LARSON

We were so moved by what those kids on stage were doing that it has made us feel very close to them.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] Alan Larson has now seen the show more than 20 times.

ALAN LARSON

I love the cast and they're- in a sense, they're like my kids.

1ST CAST MEMBER

Well, we call him 'Papa Larson.'

2ND CAST MEMBER

'Papa Larson.'

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

What does his presence mean to all of you?

3RD CAST MEMBER

It's like having a piece of Jonathan around, something to touch. We hug him.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

At what point do you come out of the fog enough to say, 'Hold it a second. I want to know more about what caused my son's death'?

NANETTE LARSON

I think within that 24 hours.

ALAN LARSON

You want to salve your own conscience for not being here-

NANETTE LARSON

Yes.

ALAN LARSON

-and so I went looking for somebody to tell us, 'Al, it wouldn't have mattered if you were standing watch over his bed.'

JULIE LARSON MCCOLLUM

We desperately, desperately, desperately wanted to find out that nothing could have been done.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] So Larson's sister and parents turned to an old family friend, attorney David Tabak.

DAVID TABAK

I got the records. I received the Cabrini X ray. I couldn't get Saint Vincent's X ray. I still don't have it. We've requested it three times. They've refused to give it to us.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] Tabak says he showed the X rays Cabrini had read as normal to four radiologists. Remember, these X rays were taken three days before Jonathan Larson died.

DAVID TABAK

They all told me the same thing, that to the extent that these hospitals read these films as being negative or normal that they were just flat out misread. The films are not normal.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

No question at all?

DAVID TABAK

No question at all. This isn't even a close call. The evidence of the aneurysm is plainly visible on both films, and had this aneurysm been surgically removed, his prognosis was excellent.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

His life could have been saved?

DAVID TABAK

His life, with reasonable medical probability, would have been saved.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] Larson's sister, Julie, says that news felt like a punch in the stomach.

JULIE LARSON MCCOLLUM

And I just remember screaming. I don't remember what I said, but I just was- just screaming at the world.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] The family came to a quick decision to sue both hospitals. We were with Alan Larson when he first saw his son's chest X ray from Cabrini.

DR LEONARD EBIN

This is an abnormal finding.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] Dr Leonard Ebin, a radiologist brought in by Larson's lawyer, explains that you can easily see evidence of an aneurysm on the aorta not only by its size, but by its placement next to the collarbone.

DR LEONARD EBIN

Normal aorta would come up to about this level and curve around here this way.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

So that's where that-

ALAN LARSON

That's a major difference. Okay.

DR LEONARD EBIN

And it's basically easy to see, and I don't know why it was missed.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

I mean, this seems pretty obvious.

DR LEONARD EBIN

It's obvious to me, and it's obvious to a well trained radiologist

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

So you're saying that anyone who is well trained in the field of radiology would be able to spot that in a second.

DR LEONARD EBIN

As an abnormality, yes.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] Alan Larson had heard enough. Still, we took the Cabrini X rays to our own expert, Dr Richard Deveraux, a professor at Cornell Medical College and the head of the echocardiology lab at New York Hospital.

DR RICHARD DEVERAUX

The easiest way to put this in perspective is to actually-

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] Using tracing paper over the Cabrini Hospital X ray, Dr Deveraux showed the position of Jonathan Larson's swollen aorta, then compared it to the position of a normal aorta. [interviewing] But a first year radiology-

DR RICHARD DEVERAUX

Oh, yes.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

-student-

DR RICHARD DEVERAUX

Absolutely. Absolutely. A first year radiology resident should be able to see this and be worried.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] Even more troubling to Dr Deveraux is the EKG from Saint Vincent's Hospital.

DR RICHARD DEVERAUX

Larson's electrocardiogram on the second emergency room visit is definitely abnormal.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] Dr Deveraux showed us what are called 'deflections' on an EKG of a normal heart.

DR RICHARD DEVERAUX

The first of the big deflections would look like this, and then the second one would be smaller than it, but easy to see.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] But on Larson's EKG, the second rise, in places, isn't there. [interviewing] This is something that you, as a physician looking at this, would take very seriously.

DR RICHARD DEVERAUX

In the setting of someone having chest pain, I would- I would certainly take this seriously and, apparently, a physician at the time did because the- in the writing up here at the top, there's a line that would at least usually mean 'question lateral myocardial infarction' or-

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] Translation - someone at Saint Vincent's who had read Larson's EKG questioned whether or not he had had a heart attack. [on camera] So could Jonathan Larson's death have been prevented? Both Cabrini and Saint Vincent's hospitals refused to discuss the case with us, as did the doctors who signed the X ray reports. The Larson family says they'll see both hospitals and doctors in court because they believe, even with an aneurysm, Jonathan Larson didn't have to die. [interviewing] How successful is treatment for an aneurysm today?

DR RICHARD DEVERAUX

In hospitals that do a substantial volume of aortic surgery, the survival of the operation is at least in the range of 80 to maybe 90 percent.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

Eighty to 90 percent successful?

DR RICHARD DEVERAUX

Yeah. So it's high. It's not 100 percent, but the success rate is quite high. And if this had led to a test that diagnosed an aortic aneurysm, he would probably be alive today and have a slightly sore chest and be getting up and around and enjoying the kudos his play has brought.

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

Not as a plaintiff, not as someone suing the hospital or the doctors, but as parents, what would you like to say to the doctors and to the hospital?

NANETTE LARSON

Mind the store.

ALAN LARSON

If someone has chest pains, think about what might be causing those chest pains. Don't say, 'What did you have for lunch?'

CYNTHIA MCFADDEN

[VO] The Larsons hope, in the long run, attention to their case improves emergency room care for others, but for now they're forced to cope with the grief painfully woven with the joy of their son's acclaim.

TONY AWARD PRESENTER

And the 1996 Tony award for Best Book of a Musical goes to Jonathan Larson for Rent.

ALAN LARSON

Parents should never have to cry for their lost children. I shouldn't have to cry at the thought that my child is dead and shouldn't be. Makes it that much worse.

DIANE SAWYER

We did receive a letter from Cabrini that denies any claim of malpractice and says Jonathan Larson received 'appropriate care.' Meanwhile, the Larson family attorney says the malpractice suit could be for more than \$250 million, which are his projected revenues from Rent. The revenues continue to mount. An original cast recording is due out next month. A Boston production of Rent is in the works with an open casting call on Friday. [Commercial break]

STATE OF NEW YORK DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

Barbara A. DeBuono, M.D., M.P.H.
Commissioner

CONTACT: Robert R. Hinckley, Director, Public Affairs (518) 474-7354



STATE HEALTH COMMISSIONER REPORTS ON INVESTIGATION INTO THE DEATH OF JONATHAN LARSON

New York, December 12, 1996 --- State Health Commissioner Barbara A. DeBuono, M.D. today released the Health Department's case report, after a four month investigation, on the circumstances surrounding the care and treatment playwright and composer Jonathan Larson received from two New York City hospitals prior to his death on Jan. 25, 1996.

The Health Department investigation was initiated after media reports alleged that Mr. Larson was not correctly diagnosed and inappropriately treated by staff at both Cabrini Medical Center and at St. Vincent's Hospital and Medical Center. As a result of that investigation, both Cabrini and St. Vincent's have been issued Statements of Deficiencies and will be fined by the Health Department.

"Mr. Larson's condition was misdiagnosed at both hospitals," said Dr. DeBuono. "However, based upon the intensive investigation of Health Department staff, and the expert advice we received from numerous medical professionals, it must be noted that correctly diagnosing Mr. Larson's condition given his presenting problems in the emergency room would have been extremely difficult."

Mr. Larson was first taken to Cabrini Medical Center's emergency room on Jan. 21, 1996 with complaints of severe chest pain. He was evaluated, treated and released with a diagnosis of "food poisoning." After once again suffering chest pain, Mr. Larson went to the St. Vincent's emergency room late in the evening of Tuesday, January 22. At that facility he was evaluated and released with a diagnosis of "viral syndrome." Within 24 hours of returning home, Mr. Larson was found dead. The New York City Medical Examiner determined the cause of death to be "aortic dissection due to cystic medial degeneration of unknown etiology."

"While we believe the diagnosis of aortic dissection would pose a diagnostic challenge to the best clinician -- given the patient's age, condition and complaints -- we do have concerns about the appropriateness and medical soundness of the treatment Mr. Larson received in their emergency rooms," said Dr. DeBuono. "That is why we feel it is incumbent upon the state to impose fines and require corrective action to ensure these deficiencies do not occur in the future."

The Health Department's investigative process included: the review of emergency room records, x-rays and radiology reports from both hospitals; the ambulance patient care report; medical background on Mr. Larson from previous caregivers; the autopsy report; peer reviews of the hospitals; hospital protocols and credential and personnel files of the staff that provided care to Mr. Larson. In addition, the Department conducted 29 interviews, which included Mr. Larson's family and friends, physicians and nurses at the hospitals, the ambulance crew and physicians who were publicly critical of the care Mr. Larson received. The Department also relied upon the advice and consultation of eight physicians (three with expertise in emergency room medicine and five board certified practicing radiologists) on the quality of care Mr. Larson received.

Among Health Department findings and deficiencies in the care provided at Cabrini Medical Center:

- Based upon the medical record documentation, the emergency room attending physician did not fully evaluate the patient's chief complaint of chest pain and did not interpret x-rays taken of the patient.
- The diagnosis of food poisoning was not supported by the patient's chief symptoms and complaints. In an interview, the emergency room attending physician acknowledged that Mr. Larson had none of the chief symptoms of food poisoning -- nausea, diarrhea and vomiting.
- The pain medication used, toradol, was inappropriate and possibly a contraindicated treatment for food poisoning, raising the potential of exacerbated gastrointestinal disease and masking important clinical problems that could significantly hinder diagnostic decision making. The use of nasogastric tube was also an inappropriate and unnecessary response to Mr. Larson's condition.
- The discharge of Mr. Larson while under the influence of a potent analgesic and without any finding as to the cause of chest pain was inappropriate.

Among the Department's findings and deficiencies cited at St. Vincent's:

- While Mr. Larson rated his chest pain at a significant level, the emergency room attending physician was not able to identify the cause of the pain. Further, pulse and respiratory rates, as well as blood pressure, were not at normal levels and should have been repeated before Mr. Larson's discharge.
- With the exception of fever, the diagnosis of viral syndrome was not supported by Mr. Larson's condition or presenting problems.

CASE REPORT ON
THE EMERGENCY CARE PROVIDED TO JONATHAN LARSON AT
CABRINI MEDICAL CENTER and ST. VINCENT'S HOSPITAL & MEDICAL CENTER

INTRODUCTION

On January 25, 1996, Jonathan Larson was found dead in his New York City apartment. During the three days before his death, Mr. Larson received emergency care at Cabrini Medical Center and St. Vincent's Hospital & Medical Center.

On January 21, 1996, Mr. Larson experienced severe chest pain and was taken by ambulance to the Cabrini emergency room. He was evaluated, treated, and released with a diagnosis of "probable food poisoning." He returned home. However, the chest pain continued. On January 23, 1996, Mr. Larson went to the St. Vincent's emergency room where he was evaluated and released with a diagnosis of "viral syndrome." Mr. Larson returned home; within 24 hours, he was dead. The New York City Medical Examiner determined the cause of death to be "aortic dissection due to cystic medial degeneration of unknown etiology."

Media reports have alleged that Mr. Larson was misdiagnosed and inappropriately treated by staff at both hospitals. In response to these allegations, the State Department of Health (Department) initiated an investigation into the care that Mr. Larson received at Cabrini and St. Vincent's. This report will describe the care that Mr. Larson received, the Department's assessment of and findings with respect to the quality of that care, and the course of action that will be taken in response to these findings.

D. AORTIC DISSECTIONS:

As stated in the autopsy report, the connective tissue degeneration that precipitated Mr. Larson's aortic dissection was of "unknown etiology". Mr. Larson did not have the classic risk factors of an elderly male with a history of hypertension. There are connective tissue diseases such as Marfan Syndrome that can cause expansion and eventual tearing of the aorta and the sudden death of the patient. While it is not known if Mr. Larson suffered from this disease, the National Marfan Foundation has been a leading proponent of the early detection and monitoring of the aorta for people with connective tissue disease. With early detection, medication and surgery can be successfully used to avoid the tragic outcome of a ruptured aortic aneurysm.

Limited awareness or suspicion of an aortic dissection as evidenced in the Larson case is not unique. The National Marfan Foundation recently reported on four other cases across the country where relatively young individuals had chest pains misdiagnosed in a hospital emergency room and died soon afterwards from a dissecting aortic aneurysm. These cases along with the death of Mr. Larson support the need for increased educational efforts to improve the awareness and knowledge of hospital emergency care providers in considering the diagnosis of a dissecting aortic aneurysm.

NEXT STEPS:

Both Cabrini Medical Center and St. Vincent's Hospital & Medical Center have been issued a Statement of Deficiencies with respect to the care provided to Mr. Larson. An acceptable Plan of Correction addressing each of the cited deficiencies is required from both hospitals within 10 days. The Department also will seek to impose a monetary penalty against both hospitals.

To improve awareness of connective tissue disorders and increase sensitivity to individuals who may be at a high risk for aortic dissection, the Department will work with the National Marfan Foundation on a campaign to educate and alert hospital emergency care providers throughout New York State. It is the Department's intent that the tragic circumstances involved in Mr. Larson's death be used in a constructive way to identify potentially treatable aortic dissections in a hospital emergency room setting.