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HEADLINE: Hospital admits it caused eye problems;
Barberton Citizens used substitute eyewash not meant for surgical use

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DATELINE: BARBERTON

BODY:

Officials at Barberton Citizens Hospital said Wednesday that vision problems suffered by seven cataract patients can be blamed on a substitute eyewash.

The hospital also promised to pay the patients' medical costs related to the problem.

Each of the affected patients had eye surgery at the Barberton hospital on March 25.

"Our preliminary review indicates the potential cause of the unexpected outcomes was the substitution of an eye irrigation solution that was made because the product we normally use was on back order and unavailable," Barberton Citizens Hospital President Willard P. Roderick said in a written statement. "We deeply regret what has happened and have expressed this personally to each of our patients."

The replacement solution, identified by hospital officials as Eye Stream, was described as a "generic equivalent" of the preferred drug. Calls to Alcon Inc., the Canadian company that makes Eye Stream, were not returned late Wednesday.

The drug, which sells for \$19.45 for a 4-ounce bottle on one Internet site, is FDA approved for irrigating the eye and relieving irritation. A description of the drug on the Web site describes Eye Stream as a sterile solution but says it should not be used for intraocular surgery.

Barberton Citizens spokeswoman Betty Wilson said the drug was chosen from an Internet reference used by hospitals. Wilson said officials will not disclose whether the decision to use the different drug was made by a licensed pharmacist or a technician.

At least one of the seven patients who received the drug has not been able to see out of her right eye since the operation.

Wilson declined to say specifically whether any or all of the remaining six had lost their vision, citing patient privacy regulations.

According to the written statement, the hospital has promised to pay for subsequent medical care that is "necessary and reasonable relative to this occurrence."

The hospital's offer extends only to the cataract operations performed on seven patients March 25.

"Any other day is not a part of this," Wilson said. "What we are learning is that this is a truly

isolated incident related to the substitution of the drug."

All of the surgeries were performed by Dr. Jeffrey Starkey, a Barberton ophthalmologist. "We have no reason to believe Dr. Starkey was aware of this," Wilson said.

Starkey's answering service said the doctor was out of town Wednesday.

Since the news of the problems became public, at least two eye surgeries scheduled for Monday at the Barberton hospital have been canceled by patients.

Kate Pleli, 38, of Akron was to have had surgery with Starkey on Monday for complications from previous **LASIK** operations performed by the doctor in his office and at Barberton Citizens Hospital between August and November 2003.

Pleli's right eye was extremely sensitive to light and she was in severe pain for months after the second surgery. She has postponed her follow-up operation until she can seek independent medical and legal evaluations of her condition.

"I could have been there with those patients on (March 25), but he was booked and ready to leave for vacation," Pleli said.

"I don't know why I've had trouble," she said. "I just want to know why my eye's messed up and whether I will have problems later."

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