

LEAP

with Dr. Gita Pensa



Physician 2: Chuck K., M.D.

Chuck (Charles) K. grew up in a family of five boys in the Midwest. His dad was in the military, and two of his brothers still are. Chuck started off his career in the military and became a surgeon in the Army. He served his country as a surgeon for many years and remains in the reserves at the age of 51. Becoming a surgeon was a lifelong dream — seemingly unattainable when he was in high school, but the military made it possible. His father could not have been prouder.

Chuck married his high school sweetheart, but they divorced after his three kids left for college. Although he was always dedicated to his career, after his divorce Chuck became doubly so. Surgery gave his life meaning and purpose, and he was good at it.

Chuck has been sued in a couple of nuisance cases in the past, which aggravated him, but they never went anywhere. But he just received notice about a wrongful death suit, and it has him up at night. The case involves a man involved in an MVC while driving drunk. He required an exlap and was in the SICU. The nurse had noted that the patient's abdomen was distended, but his NG tube was not positioned appropriately; once that was fixed, Chuck thought it was going to resolve slowly. On day two, still intubated, the patient started showing signs of sepsis physiology, and on day 3, Chuck rounded on the patient early in the morning to find he was truly crashing. His abdomen was firm and distended. Chuck realized he was likely suffering from abdominal compartment syndrome and took him emergently to the OR to re-open the abdomen, but during the procedure the patient coded and subsequently died.

By all accounts, this man was a chronic alcoholic who had estranged his family and been arrested for drunk driving several times. Not long after he died, there was a request for records, and now Chuck was being sued for delayed diagnosis of abdominal compartment syndrome and wrongful death.

On one hand, Chuck is angry at himself for realizing too late what was happening, though he thinks it was an understandable miss. On the other, he is absolutely enraged at the plaintiffs and their attorney. He felt so angry reading the complaint that he could barely see straight. The initial demand was huge. His surgical group and the hospital are also named, so now everyone knows what happened — Chuck missed the diagnosis, and someone *died*. It's a huge fucking deal. And, even though he hates thinking it, this patient was a complete jerk who was driving drunk for the hundredth time, and probably was going to drink himself to death, and would have died anyway if Chuck hadn't taken him to the OR the first time. But now Chuck is the one responsible for his death? *This* patient is the one who will ruin him?



He hates himself for thinking these thoughts. But they come anyway, and they keep him awake. And just who is this family, who never even showed up to see the patient in the SICU — who exactly is this “family” suing him? Is this just a giant money grab?

Chuck tries everything: whiskey, melatonin, Ambien, Benadryl, and still he can't sleep more than an hour or two. He's so angry. He hates how much this is affecting him. He's worried about making another mistake because he's so fucking *tired* from not sleeping. He drinks so much caffeine to stay awake that he feels shaky, which is a horrible thing for a surgeon. He doesn't want to be home where he's alone with his thoughts, but he also doesn't want to be at work. He hates seeing patients in the office — he barely wants to talk to them. He doesn't want to talk to the lawyers or insurance people, who keep wanting to meet with him. Their job is to *fix this*, to make it go away, but they haven't done their job. It makes him want to throw up his hands and leave medicine, but then what? This is who he is and what he does. But he also can't see how he can do this for fifteen more years. Let alone tomorrow.