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Texas Company Removes Web List of Malpractice Plaintiffs

By RALPH BLUMENTHAL

HOUSTON, March 10 — A doctors' Web site that compiled and posted the names of patients who have sued doctors for malpractice closed on Wednesday after complaints that it amounted to a blacklist.

The action was welcomed by patients who had been listed and a consumer advocacy group, Texas Watch, that called the five-month-old site "a mean-spirited database to deny access to medical care."

There was no notice of the shutdown, but a brief message on the suddenly blank site said, "We apologize, but the DoctorsKnow.Us Web site is no longer available."

On Wednesday evening, the site posted this message:

"DoctorsKnow.Us has permanently ceased operations as of 3/9/04. The controversy this site has ignited was unanticipated and has polarized opinions regarding the medical malpractice crisis. Our hope is that this controversy will spark a serious discussion that results in changes that are equitable to both patients and physicians. All charges that have been collected will be returned to members and trial members."

This week, after The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal had written about the site, it went blank for hours and then reappeared with a notice that said: "This is not a blacklist. Many plaintiff claims are meritorious."

John S. Jones, a Terrell radiologist who registered the DoctorsKnow.Us company in Austin in January 2003 and took it operational in November, did not respond to repeated messages left Wednesday and other days on his office answering machine.

The shutdown was praised by patients who had been listed and who were preparing to appear on television news programs like "Good Morning America."

"I think it's great," said Greg Dawson, the director of Emergency Preparedness for the North Central Texas Council of Governments who appeared on the list after having won an undisclosed settlement from doctors and a hospital in Fort Worth for their failing to detect his wife's advanced and fatal brain tumor.

Mr. Dawson said he had had trouble since then finding a doctor who would treat his 18-year-old son for a minor ailment. Mr. Dawson said that he had been preparing to appear on "Good Morning America" but that the segment was canceled after the program had been told that the Web site was closing.

On Sunday, Beth Longnecker of El Paso e-mailed a request to the site to consider listing physicians with high numbers of meritorious malpractice cases. A response on Tuesday used disparaging vulgar language.