

THE HUMAN COST OF BRINGING POULTRY TO YOUR TABLE

# Doctors question care of workers

## Medical from 12XX

"I believe we have provided the care for our employees that's expected," said Gene Shelnett, the company's human resources director.

In communities near House of Raeford's four largest plants in the Carolinas, more than 30 workers told the Observer that company medical attendants did little to help them when they suffered injuries or complained of pain. More than a dozen, including Ruiz, said those attendants refused their requests to see a doctor.

Ruiz, who began working at the West Columbia plant around 2000, said her hands were hurting after she was moved to the de-boning line, where workers make thousands of cutting and grasping motions each day.

She recalled how sharp pains shot through her hands and wrists each time she grabbed a piece of chicken streaming down the production line.

Medical experts say cysts like the one that grew on Ruiz's wrist often result from repetitive work.

Flowers told the Observer that Ruiz never asked him to see a doctor. And the company had no proof her injury was work-related, he said, noting that the cyst wasn't on her dominant hand.

Ruiz said she used both hands on the de-boning line.

In interviews last year, Ruiz said her hands still ached. She said she could no longer tie her children's shoes, and when she lifted her 1-year-old daughter, she did it with one arm.

"I can't hug her with two hands," she said. "It's not the same."

### The cost of care

Companies aren't required to provide on-site medical staff, but many poultry plants have employed them for decades.

In an industry known for the pain it inflicts on workers' hands, deciding when to send employees to doctors can have far-reaching effects.

Companies must compensate workers if they are injured on the job and require a doctor's treatment or can't work. Productivity suffers.

When injured workers require treatment beyond first aid, employers also must record those injuries on federal logs; too many injuries can draw scrutiny from workplace safety inspectors.

In this environment, medical gatekeepers can often face a choice: provide workers with the care they need or save the company money.

One House of Raeford worker with carpal tunnel syndrome said a first-aid attendant blamed her hand pain on driving a five-speed car. Another with tendinitis recalled a company nurse saying her pain resulted not from cutting thousands of chickens each day but from a previous case of meningitis.

Doctors say they've heard the stories, too.

Dr. Jorge Garcia, a physician in Newberry, S.C., has treated about 1,000 poultry workers from House of Raeford and two other companies in the past seven years. In about half the cases, he said, the workers' conditions deteriorated because they didn't see a doctor quickly enough.

"They won't send people to a doctor for a week or two or three until the problem gets worse," Garcia said. "I hear that probably 90 percent of the time. By the time they come to me ... they're not getting any better."

### 'Not the same hand'

Help came too late for former House of Raeford worker Celia Lopez.

Lifting and weighing thousands of turkey breasts each day at a House of Raeford plant near Fayetteville, her hands began to hurt so badly she could barely keep working, she said.

She said she complained to a company first-aid attendant, who gave her pain relievers but didn't send her to a doctor. Months later, in 2006, she saw Harry Cross, a physician assistant on contract with House of Raeford who gave her more pain relievers but recommended no further treatment or testing for her hands, she said.

Lopez went to an independent clinic months later and was diagnosed with carpal tunnel syndrome - a debilitating hand ailment that can be caused and aggravated by repetitive work. Last year, she had surgeries on both hands to correct the problem.

Dr. Stanley Gilbert, who performed the operations, said that by the time Lopez came to him, her injuries were already serious. Had she come sooner, he said, treatment might have prevented the need for surgery.

"If you don't treat it early enough, you can have permanent damage to the nerve," the Fayetteville doctor told an Observer reporter who accompanied Lopez on a follow-up visit last summer.

It's unclear whether the damage to



Workers make cuts on chickens flowing down a production line at the House of Raeford plant in West Columbia, S.C. It takes 2 1/2 hours for a chicken to be killed and processed at the plant, known locally as Columbia Farms.

PHOTOS BY JOHN D. SIMMONS - jsimmons@charlotteobserver.com



Dr. Jorge Garcia, who practices in Newberry, S.C., said injuries often get worse when poultry workers aren't sent quickly to doctors. "My main concern is that what started as a very minor injury becomes a very serious injury," he said.

Lopez's hands is permanent, Gilbert said.

Lopez said she still had trouble lifting dishes and changing her grandson's diapers. Sitting in Gilbert's office, she stared at her hands and lamented the damage: "My left hand - it's not the same hand."

Asked about Lopez's case last year, House of Raeford said it couldn't comment because she'd hired an attorney. Cross didn't respond to questions about her case.

Lopez, who worked under the name Milagro, was charged last summer with identity theft; police say she assumed another woman's name and Social Security number to get a job.

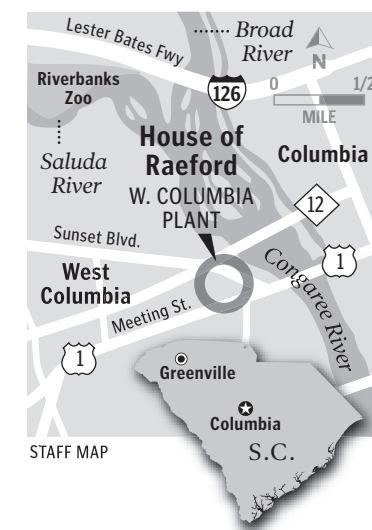
House of Raeford also declined to

comment on the cases of other workers who complained about plant medical care, saying that, without signed releases, it was unable to discuss details of their health or employment. The company said it found "many inaccuracies" in the information workers provided to the Observer but declined to elaborate.

"The allegations made by these former employees do not fairly or accurately represent the policies or management practices of House of Raeford Farms," the company wrote.

### Big job, little training

When N.C. OSHA investigated injuries at one House of Raeford plant in 1999 and 2000, it concluded that company policies were inhibiting workers



STAFF MAP

from seeking medical care.

The inspectors were trying to determine why many workers at one of the company's plants in Raeford were suffering from injuries commonly caused by repetitive motion.

"We were concerned they weren't going to get the medical treatment, and their symptoms were going to be ignored and just made worse," J.D. Lewis, the state's lead inspector in the case, told the Observer.

In court documents, regulators said a first-aid attendant at the plant had "no special training for the position" and was not licensed as a health care provider or even certified in first aid. Yet the attendant was responsible for evaluating injured workers, treating them and deciding whether to send them to licensed medical providers, the state said.

The state dropped the case in late 2000 after Superior Court Judge Jack Hooks refused to let regulators interview hundreds of workers inside the plant. The judge said inspectors had no

### House of Raeford

The privately held company, based in Raeford, is among the top 10 U.S. chicken and turkey producers.

**Chairman:** Marvin Johnson.

**Size:** Eight processing plants and 6,000 employees.

#### Customers:

- Restaurants including Blimpie, Golden Corral and Ryan's.
- Schools around the U.S., including Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

■ Stores including Food Lion and Lowes Foods. The company's deli meat is marketed under the name "Lakewood Plantation."



Sources: Observer research, House of Raeford, Dun & Bradstreet, Watt Publishing, National Poultry and Food Distributors Association

authority to investigate further because compliance deadlines for new ergonomics rules had not yet kicked in.

Today, at a neighboring House of Raeford plant, the job of treating and evaluating workers falls to Theodocia Richardson.

Her only formal health care training consists of a daylong CPR class each year, she said.

Still, she said, experience has taught her a lot. Twenty years ago, the company moved her from a job on the production floor to the first-aid station. She said she picked up many of her skills from another company first-aid attendant.

"I don't know where she got hers from, but I got mine from her," Richardson said.

She said she never provides more than basic first aid, but she can call Cross, the physician assistant on contract with the company, if she encounters a situation that's "over my limit."

The company says it follows the plans prescribed by doctors.

"We value our employees and strive to treat them in a fair and respectful manner at all times," the company said in a written response.

### 'Not right all the time'

At the West Columbia plant, some workers think Mike Flowers is a doctor.

Flowers, the plant's health and safety manager, isn't a doctor - or even a nurse.

He previously worked as a paramedic - which requires about a year of training - and as a deputy coroner. After going to work at the plant in the early 1990s, he said, he also received training on injuries and safety hazards common in poultry factories.

Flowers said he has never represented himself as a doctor, but noted that a receptionist once called him "Dr. Mike" and the name stuck.

"With my experience, I'm able to handle a lot of issues," he said during an interview last year.

Five workers told the Observer that when they complained to Flowers about injuries or persistent pain, he told them they were fine or sent them back to the line after giving them bandages or pain relievers.

Asked whether he ever refused to send workers to a doctor, Flowers said: "I may have, but I say they can go on their own, and if the doctor decides it's work-related, they can bring the bill and I'll file the claim."

But going to a doctor on their own isn't always an option. Some workers can't afford the company's health insurance or treatment from a private doctor. Others are illegal immigrants who fear they'll be fired or deported if they seek medical help.

When employees complain about pain, Flowers asks about their work and medical history and talks with their supervisors before deciding what to do, he said.

"You have to make a decision," he said. "I'm not right all the time, but I'm certainly not wrong all the time."

While carpal tunnel syndrome is common among poultry workers, Flowers' plant didn't record a single case from mid-2003 to early 2007.

Flowers described a test he uses to determine whether workers under his care suffer from carpal tunnel: The thumb, forefinger and middle finger of one hand must all be numb.

Five doctors not associated with House of Raeford criticized that test, telling the Observer it would fail to catch many serious cases of carpal tunnel.

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DR. JORGE GARCIA, A PHYSICIAN IN NEWBERRY, S.C., WHO HAS TREATED ABOUT 1,000 POULTRY WORKERS FROM THREE COMPANIES