

Teacher yanks out student's insulin pump

The East Ridge High substitute is fired after mistaking the medical device for a cell phone.

ERIN COX AND VICKI MCCLURE | SENTINEL STAFF WRITERSPOSTED | OCTOBER 6, 2005

CLERMONT -- Clifton Hassam's blood sugar has returned to normal, but the shock has not worn off.

The East Ridge High School junior said Wednesday he is still reeling after a substitute teacher mistook the student's insulin pump for a beeping cell phone and snatched it out of his hands Friday, detaching the tube regulating his blood sugar.

The least he could have done is ask me," Clifton said. "I'm just shocked. They should know my situation." The school district fired the substitute teacher Friday afternoon.

"I have nothing to say," substitute teacher Richard Maline said when reached by phone Wednesday.

Clifton, 16, said he has had Type 1 diabetes for 10 years. The pump he wears at his hip alerts him with a beep when his blood sugar reaches dangerous levels. A tube is connected to a catheter that goes beneath the skin on his thigh.

"It's my whole life on my side," he said. The square, neon-blue pump, which looks like a pager, began beeping in Clifton's third-period reading class while the students were being rowdy, he said.

Maline demanded Clifton give him the pump and took it when he refused, pulling out the tube that drips insulin into Clifton's body.

Maline "is very remorseful for what he's done," said Russell Anderson, executive director of human resources for the Lake County school district. "Had he known that was a medical instrument, he would have not done that."

Maline retired from the New York City Police Department in July after 21 years, according to district personnel records. He had worked in the district since March and substituted at East Ridge 22 days.

"This was a grave mistake on the part of the teacher's judgment," Anderson said. "When we train our substitutes, that's one of the items we cover. We specifically train our substitutes on this particular device and explain to them that a diabetic pump can be mistaken for a cell phone."

Cell phones and pagers are to be turned off and kept out of sight during school hours and on school buses, according to the district's student code of conduct. If not, they will be confiscated.

Friday was not the first time Clifton's pump has been mistaken for a cell phone, the teenager said. He said his supervisor at a Clermont Publix asked him to put away the pump until Clifton explained what it was.

Clifton's mother, Eva Hassam, filed a report with the Lake County Sheriff's Office after the East Ridge incident.

However, law-enforcement officers said they will not investigate.

"We don't see a criminal complaint here," said Sgt. Christie Mysinger. "There was no intent to cause any harm."

Other teachers knew about Clifton's disease, Mysinger said.

Pauline Ellis, senior marketing director with the American Diabetes Association, said the Clifton case seems isolated. Usually, parents will file a health plan informing teachers and school nurses about the special needs of their children.

"It probably wouldn't have happened if it had not been a substitute teacher," Ellis said.

Most insulin pumps are designed to stay put, even when swimming or playing sports.

"It would take a considerable yank to pull it out," she said.

If the pump comes off, it can be put back into place with a pump set, which comes with a catheter, tape and cleaning agents.

A 2004 settlement in Boca Raton forced school officials to make changes in the way they handle diabetic students. The \$10,000 settlement, stemming from a case in which a girl's insulin pump was confiscated by an assistant school principal, required school officials to distribute training guides to all schools, advise diabetic students of their rights, such as snacks during class and extra restroom breaks.

East Ridge Principal Aurelia Cole said the school learned of the incident after Clifton reported it at the office. An administrator was contacted immediately, she said, and the student was treated in the school clinic.

Assistant Principal John Schmidt notified district headquarters and recommended Maline no longer work as a substitute, Cole said.

She said the school had not had problems with Maline previously.

Schmidt was not immediately available to talk to Clifton's parents once they arrived at the school, Cole said, because he was working lunch duty in the cafeteria.

Cole was out of the office Friday attending a school conference in Washington.

"I don't want this kid to suffer anything," Cole said. "I'm just glad it wasn't any more serious than it was."

In a school the size of East Ridge, which has more than 2,700 students, "some things are going to happen that we don't want to happen. We have to make sure we react properly."

Clifton said he wanted to make sure the same thing did not happen to other students.

"This is just for the safety of other diabetic kids, so they don't get yanked," Clifton said.

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