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Dr. Claudia Cote took on VA, despite working there

By Andrew Meacham, Times Staff Writer

The pulmonologist successfully led a lawsuit alleging retaliation in a bias complaint.

LARGO - Dr. Claudia Cote attracted the admiration of patients and colleagues even as she fought the Department of Veterans Affairs where they were treated and employed. The VA pulmonologist took on the VA twice over alleged bias, particularly against women and older doctors.

Her Equal Employment Opportunity complaint was dropped. Dr. Cote then led a lawsuit alleging that VA authorities had retaliated against four women who participated in the complaint.

A jury sided with Dr. Cote, and awarded her and three colleagues \$3.73 million in August. Dr. Cote, who published her work in the *New England Journal of Medicine* and the *European Respiratory Journal*, died Thursday, of cancer. She was 49.

"In my mind, she is the queen of Southeastern USA for COPD. She was the guru," said Dr. Saifu Daniel, a fellow VA pulmonologist.

Her family knew her as a sucker for animals; a soprano ready to sing Latin American songs at parties; a person who laughed at jokes but could never tell one.

She was born in Bucaramanga, Colombia, and came to the United States in the mid 1980s to study English. There she met software architect David Cote, who became her husband of 15 years.

The Boston University and Tufts University graduate excelled at research, and won national recognition for her work, including a spot on the peer-reviewed Best Doctors in America list.

"She might not have been the kind of mom who went to all the school plays," said her daughter, Sophie. "But she was the kind of mom who was there when you really needed her."

In the gated Bayou Club development, Dr. Cote's home "stands out like a sore thumb," said Sophie, 18, a pre-med student. "Everybody else had these perfect hedges. Our yard was overflowing with exotic plants, ferns and orchids."

Working at the VA while suing her employer was very stressful, her daughter said. "She endured the comments, the looks, the cold shoulders. Even in the midst of that, she never strayed from what she thought was the right thing to do."

Outside Anderson-McQueen Funeral Home on Monday, a man nursed an oxygen tank on a dolly. After his wife died a year ago, Dr. Cote and Joe Pascarelli, her patient, had a heart-to-heart talk.

"We talked about death, because she felt her own was impending," said Pascarelli, 57. Doctor and patient "cried a couple of times" and talked about what matters most, Pascarelli said.

"She said, 'You do the best you can. You take care of your children.' I think she wanted to live a little longer, just for them."

Information from Times files was used for this story. Andrew Meacham can be reached at (727) 892-2248 or ameacham@sptimes.com.

.Biography

Dr. Claudia
Gisella Cote

Born: Sept. 30, 1960.

Died: Jan. 14, 2010.

Survivors: husband Mike Fiedler, daughter Sophie; son Kenny; sister Rocio Rueda; brothers Ricardo and Carlos Rueda; parents Fanny Plata de Rueda and Ricardo Rueda; nieces and nephews.

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