

Attack suit goes to jury

A woman alleging sexual assault while she was in recovery says St. Joseph Hospital was responsible.

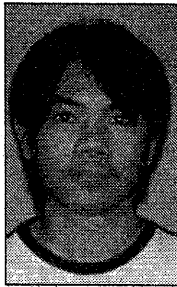
By **BLTYHE BERNHARD**
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Gretchen Loudon was recovering from an appendectomy at Saddleback Memorial Medical Center in 2004 when she was sexually assaulted by a nurse, she said.

It wasn't the first time that the nurse, Romeo Le Poblete, had been accused of sexual abuse. Two female patients at St. Joseph Hospital in Orange said earlier that year that Poblete had touched them inappropriately.

Unlike Saddleback, which called the police upon learning of Loudon's complaint, St. Joseph's officials did not call authorities when they got complaints about Poblete.

Loudon, 58, sued both hospitals and in March accepted an undisclosed amount in a settle-



Romeo Le Poblete

ment with Saddleback.

On Thursday, jurors in a Santa Ana civil court heard closing arguments from attorneys representing Loudon and St. Joseph Hospital. The jury is being asked to decide whether St. Joseph is partly responsible in any attack on Loudon.

Attorneys for St. Joseph said hospital staff members did not know whether Poblete was a sexual predator.

But Michael Grobaty, an attorney for Loudon, said St. Joseph staff members didn't report assaults to preserve the hospital's reputation.

"When you have a guy that's done this twice in your hospital ... how can you possibly ship him off to another hospital without a word of warning? St. Joseph chose to protect itself instead of protecting the safety of the public."

St. Joseph attorney T. Joshua Ritz offered several possible explanations for not reporting

Poblete as a sexual predator: The patients' memories in the St. Joseph cases may have been impaired by anesthesia as they recovered from surgery; a different nurse may have inadvertently touched their genitals while helping them dress, or hospital staff members didn't believe the complaints constituted sexual abuse.

"We didn't have the benefit of what we all know now," Ritz told the jury. "It's nonsense that the hospital would knowingly harbor a molester in their ranks." X

Police believe Poblete fled to the Philippines soon after Loudon said she was attacked. There is a \$250,000 warrant for his arrest on charges of felony sexual assault.

After Loudon made her allegations, the California Board of Registered Nursing investigated Poblete.

The board revoked his license in September 2005, citing sexual abuse at Saddleback and St. Joseph.

Loudon said she wants to be sure other women hear her story.

"I thought I was safe, and I wasn't," Loudon said.