

Deaths subject of probe 6 were residents of nursing home

By Jeff Long
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The family of a 78-year-old McHenry County nursing home resident had no suspicions that her death last year was unusual until Illinois State Police investigators began asking questions about a possible morphine overdose, the woman's daughter said Thursday.

Last week authorities exhumed the body of Virginia R. Cole, a former cafeteria worker, as part of a state police investigation into six suspicious deaths at Woodstock Residence nursing home in Woodstock, sources said.

But it may take several weeks for test results to determine whether Cole died of a morphine overdose, sources said.

"It's very difficult," said Vickie Lund, a Cary resident and Cole's daughter. "It's real hard since all this happened. We're just waiting."

Steven Levin, a lawyer for the family, said Cole's death underscores the importance of a law, which state officials have been slow to implement, that is intended to flag suspicious nursing home deaths.

Authorities plan to exhume the bodies of two other former residents of Woodstock Residence, but the exhumations have not been scheduled, a law enforcement source said. Efforts to investigate three of the suspicious deaths at Woodstock Residence have been stymied because the bodies were cremated, the source said.

Authorities have sent Cole's tissue samples to a Pennsylvania lab, according to Levin and sources.

"It's obviously a gut-wrenching experience to [the family]," Levin said. "But to the extent it would shed light on the cause of her death, they were willing to go through with it."

The state police investigation comes as the Illinois Department of Public Health, which regulates nursing homes, is setting up a team of experts that will begin this summer to analyze nursing home deaths. The team is being set up under a law approved in 2003, but not funded until last year.

The investigation is focusing on a licensed practical nurse who was put on administrative leave by the nursing home in October, according to sources and state documents. But no one has been charged.

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The graphic is a vertical rectangular advertisement for Vonage. It features a blue background with a white snowflake pattern. At the top, the Vonage logo is displayed in white. Below the logo, the text "Win a FREE MONTH of Internet Phone Service!" is written in white and blue. The central part of the graphic shows a grid of eight circular icons, each containing a penguin. The icons are arranged in two columns of four. At the bottom, there is an orange banner with the text "Scratch & match 3 phones & win a free month." in white.

Alissa Nataupsky, administrator of the Woodstock Residence, has denied that there was any wrongdoing at the home and has said that the state police investigation was triggered by complaints from a disgruntled former employee. Nataupsky did not return calls seeking comment.

Cole died of pneumonia, according to her death certificate.

She was admitted to the Woodstock Residence July 17 and was taken Sept. 6 to Centegra Memorial Medical Center in Woodstock, Levin said. She was released Sept. 9 to a hospice and died a day later, he said.

Lund said the family thought the Woodstock Residence was "an excellent place."

"Or we wouldn't have put her there," she said. "They cared for people. We ate lunch there. The place was recommended to us by the assisted-living residence where she lived for two years."

Levin said Cole was confused when she was transferred to the hospital.

"Cold. And her blood pressure was very low," he said. "The symptoms she had, in hindsight, could be consistent with a drug overdose."

Levin, who has represented nursing home residents and their families for 25 years, said the official cause listed on a death certificate can be misleading.

He said if tests suggest that Cole was given a fatal overdose, it would show the need for the new state program.

Uncovering wrongdoing in nursing home deaths that aren't obviously suspicious has always been difficult for the state Department of Public Health, Levin said.

"Once they receive a complaint, they do investigate," Levin said. "However, their investigations are limited by resources. The problem in this context arises when there is no complaint. You get this horrible situation where doctors attribute the cause of death to pre-existing conditions."

Advocates for the elderly have been pushing for years for a systematic way to analyze nursing home deaths.

"If you know who's dying, you have a better chance" of spotting problems, said Wendy Meltzer, director of Illinois Citizens for Better Care, an advocacy group. "At some point, you have somebody saying that's a lot of dead people in a short period of time."

The state's first abuse prevention review team is scheduled to start work this summer, officials said.

No state agency or employee now is responsible for analyzing nursing home deaths, according to Meltzer and officials.

The issue, experts say, is becoming increasingly important as the population ages and more people enter nursing homes. The number of people 65 and older in the United States increased by 12 percent in the 1990s, from 31.2 million to nearly 35 million, according to the 2000 census. The Census Bureau estimates that the 65-and-older population will grow four to five times faster than other age groups between 2011 and 2015.

Illinois coroners say they want a standard form that nursing homes could fill out when reporting deaths, McHenry County Coroner Marlene Lantz said. The form would ask for information about medications, illnesses or any injuries -- details that would make it easier for coroners to decide whether the case needs more investigation, she said.

Enrique Unanue, deputy director of the state Department of Public Health's office of health-care regulation, said officials often learn about suspicious deaths through complaints.

"Anybody can file a complaint," he said. "Or they can call the hot line. They can send us a letter. They can e-mail us. They can be anonymous, or they can give us their name."

The state inspects nursing homes every year -- more often if a complaint warrants a closer inquiry, Unanue said. The state also contracts with ombudsmen who look out for the rights of nursing home residents. They visit each home at least once every three months.

But few states have the time or resources to investigate every nursing home death, experts say.

"In most states, the only deaths that get reported ... would be when families express suspicions, or a hospital involved raises questions," said Erik Lindbloom, an associate professor at the University of Missouri School of Medicine, who has studied state laws related to abuse of the elderly.

Illinois law does not require the doctor who signs the death certificate to examine the body. Experts say autopsies are rarely ordered.

The new review teams -- a second will be launched in the fall -- will study cases brought to them by the Department of Public Health or by anyone else.

Funding for the program will come from fines assessed against nursing homes. About \$500,000 a year will pay for four staffers, supplies and expenses.

The launch was delayed because a system was needed to collect information from coroners, police and social service agencies, Unanue said.

It also has taken time to find qualified people for the 14-member teams, which will include law enforcement officials, psychiatrists, Health Department officials and other experts, he said.

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