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Police exhume body in nursing home inquiry

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Authorities this week returned the remains of a woman to her grave after testing them in their investigation into a former Woodstock nursing home employee who might have purposefully given fatal doses of morphine to patients.

State police exhumed the body of 78-year-old Virginia R. Cole, a former cafeteria worker, at a Libertyville cemetery on Friday, sources confirmed Wednesday. Cole died on Sept. 10, 2006, at the Woodstock Residence Nursing Home, records show.

An autopsy was performed Monday and she was returned to her grave on Tuesday, said Steve Newton, Lake County's chief deputy coroner.

"We worked with the state police and the McHenry County Coroner's Office," Newton said. "We really just oversaw the exhumation. It went smoothly."

The body was removed from the Highland Memorial Park Cemetery, 33100 N. Hunt Club Road. Officials at the private cemetery denied knowing about the body's removal.

Pneumonia and heart disease were listed as the causes of death on her death certificate.

Cole's daughter lives in Cary, but family members referred questions about the investigation to their attorney, Steven Levin, whose firm specializes in nursing home negligence cases.

Levin said Cole's family members were not jumping to conclusions about her death, but said they were suspicious as to what happened, given that the police were doing so much work and exhuming several bodies.

"Although this process is extremely painful for them, if it leads to uncovering a horrible crime, not only involving their mother, but other people's loved ones, they're willing to pay the price of the emotional trauma that this is causing and will continue to cause," Levin said.

McHenry County Coroner Marlene Lantz declined to comment on the exhumation, as did Tom Carroll, first assistant of the McHenry County state's attorney's office.

"We have an ethical obligation not to comment on ongoing investigations," Carroll said.

Illinois State Police officials, who are running the investigation, have also declined to comment.

Sources in January said they planned to dig up three bodies as part of their investigation into whether a former nurse at Woodstock Residence, 309 McHenry Ave., contributed in up to six deaths around 2006.

One of the nursing home's owners has said she thought the mercy-killing accusations came from a disgruntled employee.

Illinois State Police obtained a search warrant for the 115-bed nursing home in November, officials said, but they would not disclose how the investigation started.

In mid-November 2006, when the investigation first was reported, there were 34 deaths at the home so far during that year. In the prior three years, the number of deaths was less than 20 each year, records show.

• Northwest Herald Reporters Kevin Craver, Karen Geisler and NorthWest News Group Reporter Emily Previti contributed to this story.

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