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'Suspicious deaths' at nursing facility

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A Waukegan woman who died suspiciously in a McHenry County nursing home last year was nowhere near death when she suddenly passed, a lawyer for her family said Thursday.

Virginia Cole's body was exhumed from a Libertyville grave while authorities investigate overdose claims against a former employee at Woodstock Residence nursing home in Woodstock.

Cole's body was the first exhumed, but there may be more to come, said Tom Carroll, McHenry County first assistant state's attorney.

"There are several suspicious deaths coming from Woodstock Residence," Carroll said. "The deaths all occurred last year."

Cole, a member of the Waukegan Moose Lodge, was 78 when she died Sept. 10. At the time of her death she was suffering from Alzheimer's, but was otherwise healthy, said Chicago attorney Steven Levin.

"We do not believe that she was anywhere near death at the time this happened," Levin said.

Levin is representing Cole's family, including daughter Vickie Lund of Cary and son Kevin Cole of Fox River Grove, in an investigation of the nursing home.

On March 16, Cole's body was exhumed from Highland Memorial Park cemetery, while investigators from the McHenry County Coroner's Office and investigators from the Illinois State Police did an autopsy. She was reburied earlier this week.

The findings of that autopsy were not released, Carroll said. McHenry Coroner, Marlene Lutz, who was the lone representative from her office at the autopsy, was not available Thursday.

The exhumation has been tough on Cole's family, Levin said. On one hand, they want their mother to rest in peace, but they also seek the truth.

Questions into care at the nursing home arose earlier this year when McHenry authorities announced they were investigating claims an employee at the nursing home gave fatal doses of pain killers to some patients.

Though he has not been given access to the current investigation, Levin said there are rumors the staffer poisoned patients to lighten her load of patients.

Carroll said he could not comment on specifics in the investigation, or from where the next body may be exhumed.

Woodstock Residence officials have declined to comment on the investigation.

The 115-bed facility has been fined twice in recent years. In 1999, the Illinois Department of Public Health fined them \$10,000 for failing to provide proper care to an 88-year-old resident who fell and broke her leg. And in 2004, the state fined the home \$5,000 for failing to properly supervise a resident who attempted to leave the facility at least 13 times in five weeks.

Levin said the family expects additional information about Cole's death within the next week.

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