

Death by Suffocation

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Alarms sounded, no staff answered

Investigation will ask why alarms were not answered; Results will be made public

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EDMONTON

Staff at a Mill Woods extended-care facility did not respond to a pager alarm which sounded automatically after an elderly patient became disconnected from his breathing machine and died, the facility's chief operating officer said Sunday.

"We know a pager alarm was sent at 10:56 (a.m.) and he was found close to 20 minutes later," Joyce Johnson said in an interview.

"We don't know yet what happened in that interim period. But we will know sometime in the future when we finish off this big investigation."

The 72-year-old man, paralysed by Lou Gehrig's disease and dependent on a ventilator, died Friday morning at the Good Samaritan Mill Woods Centre. At his family's request, his name has not been released.

The man had been left alone in a bathroom by a nursing attendant. Their agreement was that he would have 15 minutes of privacy.

He became disconnected from his ventilator and two separate alarms sounded. The pager alarm sends a signal to pagers carried by "four or five" members of the nursing staff on the 15-patient chronic ventilator unit, Johnson said.

The other alarm sounded in the patient's room, Johnson said.

It would have been audible to anyone in the immediate area.

Both the bathroom door and the door to the room were closed at the time, at the patient's request, Johnson said. "This man was very, very precise on how he wanted things done."

When he was discovered by the same attendant who had left him in the bathroom, the patient was not breathing. The alarm in his room was ringing. The nursing attendant heard it from the hall, Johnson said.

Staff members didn't try

to revive the man because he had left instructions against resuscitation.

An investigation into the death is underway. Johnson and the chief of the centre's medical staff are conducting it together.

In addition, an extra staff member has been added to the day shift on the dead patient's unit, at Capital Health's request. The move is a precaution, pending the outcome of the review.

To determine that an alarm was sent to pagers, one staff member's pager unit was checked, Johnson said.

"We only looked at one to see whether a call came in. You can go to the alarm and scroll through it and see that there was a call from that room at 10:56."

The staff member with that pager did not respond. Johnson couldn't say why because that person has not been interviewed. "We don't want people to feel that somebody is being targeted at this point when we don't know really what happened."

Johnson said it's too early to say exactly how many

other people on the nursing staff received a pager alarm. The information is stored on a central computer but has not yet been retrieved. This will happen sometime this week.

The Mill Woods centre is funded by Capital Health and run by the Good Samaritan Society. Society president and CEO Phyllis Gaudet said results of the investigation will be made public. "We're going to try to get more answers to more questions," Gaudet said. "We want people to know what happened, in particular the family. We want this not to happen again."

Johnson said the man who died was wearing an alarm button on his wristband, but because he was paralysed he couldn't activate it.

The wristband alarms were introduced after the suffocation deaths of two patients in a three-month period in the mid-1990s.

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