

## Autopsy fuels family's claims

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PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Wednesday, May 12, 2010

Natural causes killed the Hazelwood man who died while waiting 30 hours for an ambulance during the Feb. 5-6 snowstorm, according to an autopsy report released this week.

Curtis Mitchell, 50, of Chaplain Way died Feb. 7 primarily from heart disease, though a fatty liver contributed, according to the Allegheny County Medical Examiner's Office. The type of heart disease Mitchell had is the leading cause of death in the country, Medical Examiner Karl Williams said.

The autopsy report is proof Mitchell could have been saved if city EMS workers had better responded to his 911 calls, said Mitchell's widow, Sharon Edge, and an attorney for one of Mitchell's children.

"We're not exactly sure what put him over the edge, but he needed medical attention," said Alan H. Perer, who represents daughter Theresa Thornton. "Really, it's inexcusable what happened to this man. ... We as citizens rely on our government to take care of us when we need it. And there was certainly a breakdown somewhere in the system that allowed people to ignore him, to ignore his requests for help, and allowed someone to die."

Williams said the medical examiner's office does not judge whether Mitchell's death could have been prevented with a prompt response from EMS.

"Those are the arguments we really can't make. Those are the arguments that attorneys from one side or the other are going to make," Williams said. "It is a common cause of death, enlarged heart, fatty liver, that sort of thing. They are common things we see at autopsies that we use to explain deaths."

Mitchell and Edge placed 10 calls to 911 about his stomach pain during the crippling snowstorm. While the couple waited, Pittsburgh paramedics talked about Mitchell with each other, saying that he could wait, that he should just go to sleep and that EMS "ain't no cab service."

City leaders suspended three EMS workers and fired another for the response to Mitchell's 911 calls. The paramedics union is appealing the discipline levied against two workers it represents and is awaiting the city's response, due Thursday, union President Anthony Weinmann said.

Perer said he sent a copy of the autopsy report to city officials Tuesday, offering them a chance to settle with family members and avoid a lawsuit. He declined to say how much it would take to satisfy the family.

The city's Law Department had yet to see the autopsy report or Perer's letter, said city solicitor Dan Regan.

"Until we receive those documents, we couldn't say whether or not the city would consider settling the matter," Regan said.

Perer's firm is working with Robert N. Peirce III, who is representing Mitchell's son, Jeremiah C. Mitchell. Edge has her own lawyer, Albert G. Reese, who said he had yet to see the report.

The autopsy found a poor blood supply likely caused Mitchell's intestines to swell. Mitchell had spent two weeks in the hospital in late January with the same type of pain that led to the 911 calls, Edge said.

The autopsy reports a recent hip surgery, but it played such a minor role in the exam that Williams, reached late yesterday, wasn't sure how it ended up in the report, he said. His staff researches medical records and talks to doctors for their autopsies, he added.

Mitchell went into few details about his condition with Edge, and did not report hip surgery, she said. He said he was going to need surgery for pancreatitis, she said.

"If they would have made it to the hospital in time, he could have had the surgery," Edge said.

The autopsy was finished Feb. 9, but the report was delayed for months while the county sought a toxicology exam. It found opiates, hydrocodone and alcohol in his blood, but the autopsy did not connect that with Mitchell's death.

Mitchell did like to drink, but never took painkillers until they were prescribed during his January hospital stay, Edge said.

Mitchell's blood-alcohol level was at .196 percent, more than twice the legal limit for drivers. But that is a relatively common rate, and would likely need to have been twice as high to be considered deadly, Williams said.