

Report Shows State Hospital Patient Died After Drug, Data Were Misplaced

By Sigrid Bathen
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A 9-year-old epileptic and mentally retarded boy died at Stockton State Hospital in 1972 after his medication and important medical information concerning his allergic reaction to the epilepsy drug Dilantin were "misplaced."

The boy died Dec. 22, 1972, four days after being transferred to Stockton from Porterville State Hospital and the day after Dilantin was prescribed for him by a hospital physician who apparently did not know of the boy's allergy to the drug.

The boy's hospital records are contained in reports compiled during a recent State Health Department investigation into conditions at the Stockton facility.

State health officials expressed shock and dismay at accounts of the 1972 death, which they attribute to a series of administrative errors beginning prior to the boy's admission. Don Stockman, who coordinated much of the state investigation, said accounts of events leading to the boy's death "turned my stomach."

"I was appalled," he said. "Here was a young man who lost his life because some idiot forgot about some forms."

The investigation was ordered in October by Health Department Deputy Director Don Z. Miller after publicity about a 6-year-old mentally retarded child, Michael McKibben of Sacramento, who was found battered and bruised at the hospital.

The reports are being studied by the state attorney general's office, the San Joaquin County district attorney's office and a citizens' review
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committee appointed by the Health Department.

Miller last month announced numerous reforms in hospital operations as a result of the investigation, which he initially declined to make public. He agreed to allow The Bee access to the reports provided patient confidentiality is protected.

The circumstances which culminated in the child's death apparently began on Dec. 14 or 15, 1972, when—according to Stockton State Hospital records—officials at Porterville State Hospital sent a telegram to Stockton warning of the boy's "toxic reaction" to Dilantin. That message was evidently misplaced, ignored, forgotten or otherwise lost until Dec. 21—after the boy was given Dilantin for an epileptic seizure.

"I am sure the teletype arrived at Stockton," Miller said. "Just what happened after it got there is very vague."

The boy was brought by his parents to Stockton on the evening of Dec. 18, three or four days after the ill-fated telegram was sent from Porterville. The child's mother, contacted at the family's home near Stockton, said the boy's medication was given to hospital employes when he was admitted on Dec. 18.

The medication, like the telegram, was misplaced, and employes on his ward—including physicians—apparently did not initially know the child was an epileptic.

The regular ward physician, Dr. Sheldon Yucht, was off-duty when the boy was admitted, so he was seen by Dr. Robert Griswold, a psychiatrist in a San Joaquin County-operated program for the mentally ill on the state hospital grounds. Dr. Griswold was designated as "medical officer of the day" at the time the boy was admitted. He said he assumed the medical evaluation of the child had already been done at Porterville, and he prescribed only a sedative for sleep.

"I don't know anything about the background of the case," he said.

"I worked with the mentally ill, and the workings of the retarded section were largely a mystery to me."

According to hospital records, the boy experienced a grand mal epileptic seizure on Dec. 21, Dr. Yucht prescribed Dilantin and 24 hours later the child died.

Dr. Yucht, who is now at the Sacramento Medical Center, said the circumstances surrounding the boy's death involved "an unfortunate combination of oversights."

Dr. John Freeman, the medical director at Stockton, who has been criticized by state officials and is on a kind of "probation" as a result of the state investigation, said the telegram describing the child's "toxic reaction" to Dilantin was found by Dr. Yucht after the Dilantin was administered.

The same day the boy died, psychiatric technician Betty Rozier (now retired) made a routine visit to Porterville to pick up patients destined for Stockton. Mrs. Rozier was employed on the same ward where the boy was admitted at Stockton, and she was aware of the Dec. 21 seizure.

"I told them at Porterville we had a really sick kid," she recalls. "They gave me a stack of records and (his) records were on the bottom. By the time I got back to Stockton, he was dead."

"If that telegram (advising Stockton of his allergy to Dilantin) was sent on the 14th, the ward staff didn't know about it. Who can you blame? When the teletype came, it should have been sent to the ward. We should never let parents bring kids up, because they don't come with the records."

"The medication they brought was somehow misplaced and sat on a sink shoved behind some things. We found it later. The admitting technician was not used to admitting patients, and she felt just awful. I thought she would crack up."

"It was a horrible foul-up. Everybody was to blame, and nobody was to blame."

The San Joaquin County coroner's office attributed the death to "apparent natural causes—exact type undetermined."

Freeman said he appointed a committee to investigate the boy's death, and the matter was referred to the state attorney general's office. Jack Burrows, a claims coordinator in the attorney general's office to whom deaths in state hospitals are reported, said he had no records on the incident. "I recall reading the thing," he said. "Evidently no formal investigation was conducted and no lawsuit was filed."

Donald Loy was director of the children's program in which the child was a patient, but he declined to discuss the incident and referred all inquiries to Freeman.

The boy's mother, who asked that neither her nor her son's name be used, said the family did not file suit because "I hate to go back and look back. And we had so many hassles with the state bureaucracy.

Dr. Yucht was very nice and very helpful . . . It's one of those things we can talk about until we're blue in the face, but it won't do any good."