

Criminal probe launched after Pompano girl, 10, dies while getting tooth pulled

By Bob LaMendola
South Florida Sun-Sentinel Health Writer
Posted December 6 2006

Prosecutors and police are conducting a criminal investigation of two dentists who treated a 10-year-old Pompano Beach girl who died while having a tooth pulled in March.

Dasia Washington, who had asthma and a birth defect that can restrict the airway, stopped breathing in the dentist chair shortly after receiving nitrous oxide gas to calm her and shots to numb her mouth, according to police reports and state health records.

LocalLinks

The Broward State Attorney's Office and Coral Springs police said they have been reviewing the girl's March 21 death for eight months to determine whether the dentists, Dr. Abbe Silverberg-Aroshas, from Boca Raton, and Dr. Edward R. Walters, from Coral Springs, bear any responsibility.

Officials declined to say what the dentists might have done wrong. But the Florida Department of Health filed disciplinary actions against the two, alleging among other things that they made little or no attempt to revive Dasia with cardiopulmonary resuscitation, breathing devices or other lifesaving efforts.

"[Dasia] died as a result of inadequate dental, medical and emergency treatment rendered at [Walters'] practice," the health department said in a June 30 administrative complaint against Walters.

In statements to police the day of the death, both dentists said they did not try to revive Dasia because she appeared to be breathing on her own, her eyes were open and she had a weak pulse. But Coral Springs paramedics who responded told police they found no signs of life and could not revive her. She was pronounced dead at the hospital.

"The one thing I did not see was CPR being performed. And I was kind of shocked by that, you know, and we all talked about it like we couldn't believe that nothing was being done," paramedic Laura Young said in a statement to police.

Walters, 59, who had been one of the busiest South Florida dentists for children in the state Medicaid program, has closed his office and quit practicing. His attorney declined to comment. So did an attorney for Aroshas, 48.

The Broward County Medical Examiner's office performed an autopsy as is standard when a patient dies in a health-care setting, a spokeswoman said, but would not release the findings at the request of prosecutors. Police declined to comment, saying they gave their findings to prosecutors and are keeping their case open.

A spokesman for the State Attorney's Office, Ron Ishoy, said only, "We are still investigating."

Deaths in dental offices are extremely rare, especially among children, said Dr. John Tabak, an instructor at the Nova Southeastern University dental school. The few that occur usually stem from allergic reactions to anesthesia or to previously unknown medical conditions. Government agencies and dental associations said they have no statistics on such cases.

Dasia had been to the Coral Springs dental office many times before her death, Walters told police in his statement. She was born with Treacher Collins syndrome, in which the facial bones, jaw and underlying tissue are misshapen. A rare condition striking 1 in 50,000 babies, the defects can restrict the airway and the person's ability to breathe.

For years, Dasia breathed via a tube in her throat, but she began breathing on her own about two months before her death, the dentists told police.

Walters said he assigned Dasia to Aroshas, who worked part-time as an independent contractor and had not treated Dasia before. The girl was nervous and excitable, prompting the dentists to give her nitrous oxide through a mask over her nose, Aroshas told police.

Aroshas waited for Dasia's mouth to get numb, then started the tooth extraction, she told police. About 10 minutes after the mask went on, Aroshas said she noticed Dasia had grown still and her oxygen levels were falling on a monitor. She said she dashed to get Walters, then called 911.

As Dasia's mother cried in fear in the waiting room, Walters said he turned off the gas, set the mask to pump pure oxygen, finished pulling the tooth and waited for paramedics.

Dasia's mother, Novice Mclish, declined to comment.

After the death, the state health department in June forbade both dentists from using nitrous oxide or any sedation other than local anesthesia, and also filed complaints seeking to revoke or suspend their licenses, or fine them. The cases are still pending.

A state health department complaint against Aroshas said she failed to try to revive Dasia. The state said the same of Walters, adding he did not have a proper emergency response plan for the office as is required, and wrongly delegated the case to Aroshas.

Dentists are trained to act immediately if a patient's oxygen level falls too low, by connecting the person to a breathing device or by pumping air manually using a bag, said NSU's Tabak, who teaches the use of anesthesia and is not involved with the case.

"If a patient stops breathing, you need to breathe for them," said Tabak, speaking generally about dental care.

Dasia had never shown any allergic reaction to anesthesia in the past, Walters told police, though he could not recall whether she ever had nitrous oxide.

The Compressed Gas Association, an industry group for nitrous oxide, said the gas relaxes patients by causing mild oxygen deprivation and euphoria and is considered very safe. But too much of the gas can render a person unconscious, stop breathing and suppress the body's natural instinct to fight when deprived of air, according to the association.

Over the past decade, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has identified two surgical patients, elsewhere in the United States, who overdosed when oxygen tubes were mistakenly connected to nitrous oxide tanks, and at least three men died of overdoses after illegally inhaling the gas to get high.

Dentists should use extra caution before sedating children with facial deformities, federal health officials say. Also, the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry has cautioned against using nitrous oxide on patients with severe asthma.

Two plastic surgeons who operated on Dasia in the past to correct her facial problems said she had no problems under anesthesia.

"These kids are always very tricky. Ninety-nine percent of plastic surgeons and dentists wouldn't even consider taking them," said Dr. Eric J. Stelnicki, a Hollywood plastic surgeon who saw Dasia. "They are at higher risk and it's always sad when something happens to them."

Bob LaMendola can be reached at blamendola@sun-sentinel.com or 954-356-4526 or 561-243-6600, ext. 4526.