

Patient beaten, killed at psychiatric hospital

By KEVIN WILSON

A 20-year-old patient at Northville Regional Psychiatric Hospital was choked or smothered to death by at least one of three patients who beat him in the hospital's Young Adult Unit Sunday night, state police said.

Greg Helzerman of Van Buren Township was pronounced dead at 8:47 p.m. Sunday at St. Mary Hospital in Livonia. His death was caused by suffocation, the Wayne County Medical Examiner's office reported after a Monday autopsy.

MSP Community Service Officer Robert Garcia said police planned to request murder warrants against the three suspects Tuesday. Detectives said they would request first- or second-degree homicide charges, with the county prosecutor to decide the actual charge brought.

Police said the investigation is centered on one of the three suspects, a 20-year-old Garden City man believed to be the instigator of the beating and the one who reportedly choked the victim, then held a pillow over Helzerman's face.

The man, who was admitted on a court order after attempting suicide and was under "watch alert" for suicidal tendencies, was sedated Sunday evening and transferred late Monday afternoon to the Ypsilanti Forensic Center for psychiatric evaluation. He has not been questioned by police.

Two others involved in the beating, aged 18 and 19 and both from Detroit, have been questioned and remain at the Northville hospital.

According to a report filed by Northville Post Trooper Richard Percy, the beating and subsequent suffocation took place in a "quiet room" on the ward in the hospital's M Building. The room is set aside for patients who need separation from the ward situation, either for counseling or isolation. Helzerman evidently retreated to the quiet room for privacy shortly before the beating, police reported.

Percy said the door to the room was left open during the assault and interviews with four patients who witnessed the incident through the open doorway are key elements of his report.

The witnesses said the three suspects were punching Helzerman while he lay on a bed in the quiet room. One told police he saw the Garden City man choking Helzerman and another that he saw several blows directed to the victim's throat. Another witness saw the 5-foot-6, 244-pound Garden City man hold a pillow over the 5-foot-9, 198-pound victim's face.

Of four "resident care aides" assigned to care for patients on the ward, Per-

cy's report reveals only one was immediately available to oversee patients. One was on a lunch break, a second was on the first floor taking a break and a third was engaged in one-on-one counseling with a patient, the police report states.

The fourth RCA was busy at the nursing station, at the opposite end of the ward from the quiet room, filling out paperwork related to two "walkaway" incidents reported earlier in the day when a patient approached him and said: "You have a corpse at the end of the hall," according to the police report.

This patient, one of the witnesses to the beating, said he was threatened with similar treatment unless he assisted Helzerman's assailants. He told police he left the area when threatened and returned later to discover the three suspects gone and Helzerman on the bed.

The RCA told police he found Helzerman was not breathing and had no pulse, then began cardio-pulmonary resuscitation techniques immediately and called in a medical emergency report. A nursing supervisor was the first to respond to the medical emergency call, which was logged at 7:30 p.m.

The RCA who made the report told police he was dissatisfied with the response time and issued a second call. Paramedics from Novi Ambulance reportedly arrived at 8 p.m. Sunday, Percy's report says.

The nursing supervisor told police Helzerman appeared to be dead when found — his pupils were dilated and fixed, there was no pulse or breathing evident. When police, dispatched at the start of their shift at 8 p.m., arrived 20 minutes later, they were told the victim had already been taken away by ambulance but that the nursing staff was certain he was already dead.

The three suspects were each committed to the hospital on 60-day court orders. Helzerman entered the hospital April 28 to be treated for disorientation.

The state department of mental health has launched an internal investigation of the incident, the first homicide reported at the hospital since a federal investigation determined that overcrowding and understaffing at the institution posed a danger to patients.

Population at the hospital was most recently reported at 1,050 patients — virtually identical to the census reported during the federal civil rights investigation. A plan to reduce the population to fewer than 700 is pending legislative approval and the renovation of a portion of Plymouth Center for Human Development.



Russell and Florentine Amerman help kindergartners celebrate the school's 30th anniversary

Record photo by STEVE FECHT

PTA-PTSA News

School fairs highlight year-end events

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Northville PTA-PTSA news, published the last Wednesday of the month September through June, is compiled by volunteer Linda Handyside who correlates material

from publicity persons in the Northville Public Schools. Jeannette Westerhaus compiles St. Paul's Lutheran School news and Cindy Nuttall, Our Lady of Victory.

AMERMAN SCHOOL

In honor of Arbor Day, the Country Girls Garden Branch donated Silky Dogwood trees to Amerman students. The community will reap the benefits as the trees grow and flourish in years to come.

Amerman students are to be commended for their participation in the March of Dimes Read-A-Thon. Some 82 Amerman readers read 1,386 books, bringing in a profit of \$1,688 for the March of Dimes which was the highest in Wayne County.

Shon Halacka and Frances Miller are to be congratulated for organizing Teacher Appreciation Week (May 6-10) activities. Amerman teachers received a special bulletin board along with apples, note pads, buttons, Happy Grams and Certificates of Accomplishment.

Amerman playground has taken on a new look with painted game centers purchased with PTA funds. The Northville Mothers' Club purchased a large screen TV for the school.

Amerman was a busy place during

Continued on 8

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