

How could baby's autopsy be so wrong?

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Experts are at a loss to explain the original conclusion that a 7-month-old girl's death was a homicide. Her death was later attributed to pneumonia.

If Rebecca Long died of pneumonia, why did the former Pasco-Pinellas Medical Examiner attribute the death of the 7-month-old girl to "blunt traumatic head and neck injuries?"

Dr. Stephen Nelson can't answer that for sure, but he does have some observations.

Look at the cover page of the autopsy report, Nelson said, and see what someone typed next to "Sex."

Male.

Nelson has more. Under a heading that says "FINAL ANATOMIC DIAGNOSIS," the report notes that Rebecca suffered a subarachnoid hemorrhage -- bleeding in the brain. On the next page, it says there were "no distinct areas of subarachnoid hemorrhage." A paragraph later, it says there is a "1.5 x 1 cm subarachnoid hemorrhage" in the left side of Rebecca's brain.

It was on the basis of this report that a grand jury indicted Rebecca's father, David Raymond Long, on a charge of first-degree murder in the March 1998 death of his daughter.

Last month, Nelson and three other pathologists, including current Pasco-Pinellas Medical Examiner Jon Thogmartin, reviewed the original autopsy reports, tissue samples and the child's brain. They found no evidence to support the original conclusion that Rebecca suffered fatal brain injuries.

Their conclusion: Rebecca died of bronchial pneumonia. The original autopsy report makes no mention of pneumonia.

On Thursday, based on the new finding that Rebecca died of natural causes, State Attorney Bernie McCabe dropped the murder charge against David Long, 35, of Holiday.

The question now is: How did the former medical examiner, Joan Wood, and her assistant, Marie Hansen, get it wrong?

"I don't have an explanation," said Nelson, the Polk County Medical Examiner who consulted on the case because of his expertise in the field of neuropathology.

None of the injuries cited by Hansen and Wood were present in microscopic slides that normally are preserved to document the cause of death, Nelson said. Nor did he observe any significant signs of injuries in Rebecca's brain.

"It makes me wonder, 'Where was it?' " Nelson said of the brain hemorrhaging noted on the autopsy report. "It's not in the brain I saw."

According to the original autopsy report, there is nothing to suggest that a neuropathologist was consulted before the cause of death was announced. A specialist should have been called in, Nelson said, because "these are very complex cases."

"That could be what we're dealing with here -- a lack of familiarity," Nelson said.

But that still doesn't explain why Hansen and Wood missed the pneumonia that, according to Thogmartin, was present "in pretty much every part of (Rebecca's) lungs."

It's possible, Thogmartin said, that Hansen, who conducted the autopsy, and Wood focused primarily on the brain. After all, he said, "The brain is what kills you." There is even more of a tendency to focus on the brain, Thogmartin said, when shaken baby syndrome is suspected.

"But (Rebecca's) brain is pretty much normal," he said. "It's certainly not what you'd see in a typical shaken baby case."

Thogmartin said the new findings took into account changes that occurred in Rebecca's body in the hours after she went into cardiac arrest. Rebecca was revived and lived for nine hours. Hansen and Wood could have misinterpreted the changes in Rebecca's body as evidence of trauma, Thogmartin said.

Long told authorities that he had a vague memory of shaking Rebecca on May 7, 1998. But that could have been when he tried to revive her, he said.

Nelson and Thogmartin said there is no medical evidence of any violent shaking. Nelson added that he was "bothered" by hemorrhaging along Rebecca's spinal cord, but it was evident that didn't kill her because of the lack of injuries in the child's brain.

"I can't tell you on what basis (Hansen) made her findings," Thogmartin said. "You'd have to ask her."

Hansen offered no answers on Thursday. She said the conclusion that Rebecca died of pneumonia was based on new information developed after the autopsy.

"In science, you always have to leave open the possibility that new information may show something different," said Hansen, who now works in the Medical Examiner's office in Panama City.

Long's attorney, Mina Morgan, said there hasn't been any new information. Morgan said Hansen and Wood ignored evidence that was there all along because they suspected Rebecca died of shaken baby syndrome.

"I think it was an agenda," Morgan said. "People are too eager to prosecute someone when a baby's dead."

Wood resigned in September 2000 after prosecutors blamed her for the collapse of a criminal case against the Church of Scientology. In that case, Wood originally concluded that Lisa McPherson died of complications from dehydration in 1995 after spending 17 days in the care of fellow Scientologists. Wood later ruled McPherson's death an accident. The Times and private investigators working for Long's lawyers have been unable to contact Wood for more than a year.

Said Long's wife, Teresa: "I'm very thankful that (Thogmartin) did his job. I knew David didn't kill our daughter."

Asked how something like this could happen, Thogmartin defended his profession.

"These things happen occasionally," he said. "You're making an opinion based on a reasonable degree of medical certainty."

"I could be wrong," Thogmartin said of his finding, "but I don't think so. And neither do three other people who looked at this case."