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Lake Mary pathologist still wonders about man's 2003 death

September 18, 2011 | By Jim Stratton, Orlando Sentinel

LAKE MARY — Pathologist William Anderson has performed 8,000 autopsies in his career, but it's one he didn't do that troubles him.

Eight years ago, Anderson reviewed the death of a 71-year-old Sarasota man who apparently had died of a heart attack. The case appeared unremarkable, police said nothing was amiss, and the man's new wife did not request an autopsy. So Anderson signed the death certificate and moved on.



That, Anderson says, was a mistake.

"If we'd known then what we found out later, I definitely would have ordered an autopsy," he said in recent interview. "It mystifies me that it hasn't happened yet."

Now a private pathologist in Lake Mary, Anderson has been saying the same thing for six years. He is a supporting player in a bitter dispute between the dead man's son — who thinks his father was murdered — and Sarasota law-enforcement officials who say the son — South Florida resident Steve Esdale — sees conspiracies in every shadow.

Sarasota authorities closed the Murray Cohen case long ago, saying there was nothing else to investigate. But within the last year, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement reviewed it — for a second time — conducting interviews with Anderson and other witnesses.

Esdale's attorney, Mark Gelman of Jacksonville, says FDLE's involvement raised his hopes that the case might be reopened. But just a few weeks later, FDLE dropped the case, said Gelman, who is representing Esdale for free.

"A supervisor just told me it had been shut down," Gelman said.

Cohen died at his home in early 2003. Esdale thinks he was poisoned by his new wife, Maria, a former Bolivian narcotics agent 24 years his junior. She has said she had nothing to do with his death and accused Esdale of harassing her in an attempt to claim his father's estate.

Anderson attributed Cohen's death to heart problems, but as more information surfaced, he had second thoughts.

The Lake Mary pathologist has said that Cohen, who is buried in New Jersey, should be his remains tested for a potentially lethal drug called Corazol. Outlawed in the U.S., a stimulant used to induce seizures in rats.

It was discovered in Murray Cohen's home after his death, but no one realized its significance until it was spotted on a Sheriff's Office document in 2005.

When Anderson took the information to officials, they looked for Corazol in eye fluid left over from Cohen's autopsy tests. The results were negative, and Sarasota's new medical examiner said no other tests were necessary.

Anderson disagreed, signing an affidavit that said there was "an immediate and urgent need" to exhume the body. He thought an exhumation might be forthcoming after FDLE agents interviewed him

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"There's no reason Corazol should have been in the country, much less his medicine chest," Anderson said. "If you find even some of it in his system, that changes everything."

Since his father's death, Esdale has relentlessly collected information that challenges the official version of the incident. There are three witnesses who dispute the wife's account; a sketchy sheriff's timeline; and a 911 tape that two independent experts say reveals a man in the background crying for help — a man supposed to be dead.

The tape is hardly conclusive, but Gelman says even one of the FDLE agents told him he heard Cohen's new wife urging Cohen to "give up." Ultimately, FDLE would not reopen the case, saying Sarasota authorities had taken the steps necessary to reach a conclusion.

Sarasota officials said all questions about the case have "been asked and answered." Gelman and Esdale insist that's not true, pointing to the Corazol and three witnesses who contradict the official version of the death.

There also is a 20-minute inconsistency in the Sheriff's Office timeline. Investigators say the 911 call was placed at 5:38 p.m., but the 911 recording says the call came in 20 minutes later.

The difference is crucial because Murray Cohen's stockbroker called the home twice just after 5:30 p.m. He said each time, he heard a couple arguing before the phone was hung up. Investigators say the stockbroker called just after Maria Cohen discovered her husband unconscious and heard the sounds of a distraught wife and paramedics at work.

But if the 911 recording is correct — if the call was placed at 5:58 p.m. — the stockbroker could not have heard paramedics, because he called 15 minutes before they were summoned.

Sheriff's spokeswoman Wendy Rose suggested last week that the time on the 911 recording was off by 20 minutes. She said other records, putting the call at 5:38 p.m., were more accurate.

Maria Cohen's former attorneys would not discuss the case and said they did not know where she is living. Lawyer John Waskom said he was "pretty sure she doesn't want to talk about Steve Esdale."

Esdale has few options left, and over time, he has badly hurt his own cause. He is given to profanity-laced tirades and, in the past, made vaguely menacing calls to public officials. Esdale's behavior aside, Anderson said an autopsy could dispel any lingering questions.

"There's information that's not being collected that could provide some answers," he said. "Scientifically, that's not defensible."

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