

# Impartial review needed Amanda Wienckowski's troubling death calls for an independent inquiry

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By Staff

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Questions that have been raised about the work of the Erie County Medical Examiner's Office should be settled by an independent inquiry into the death of Amanda L. Wienckowski.

Confidence in the office has been shaken by the findings of a private autopsy that directly contradict the official report, that Wienckowski died of an accidental drug overdose. A West Coast pathologist hired by the family stated that Wienckowski was strangled, and now the family wants justice.

The frozen body of the 20-year-old former Kenmore resident was found in an East Side garbage tote three years ago.

Medical Examiner Dianne R. Vertes conducted the county autopsy and determined that Wienckowski died from an overdose of opiates.

Outraged at what that autopsy found, Wienckowski's family hired a West Coast pathologist to conduct a second autopsy. That pathologist, Silvia O. Comparini, determined that Wienckowski had been beaten, raped and strangled before her body was discarded.

Vertes is now the chief medical examiner, and as might be expected has stood by her original autopsy and disputed the results of the private autopsy. Vertes' boss, outgoing Health Commissioner Dr. Anthony J. Billittier IV, also emphatically defends the original autopsy findings.

Wienckowski's mother, Leslie L. Brill, insists that the second autopsy report and previously collected DNA prove someone killed her daughter. The county insists the death was accidental. It's important to find out which one is right, and the way to do that is to have a truly independent review of all the autopsy results.

The family has never denied that their loved one led a tough life before she died. Authorities say Wienckowski had worked as a prostitute. She disappeared in December 2008 after receiving a ride from her Lewiston home to a residence on Spring Street on the East Side for what authorities say was a paid sexual encounter. Her relatives dispute that

claim. Her mother says she had been addicted to drugs for three years but had recently cleaned up. Wienckowski's body was found Jan. 9, 2009, in a plastic garbage can at a church alcove directly across the street from the Spring Street address.

District Attorney Frank A. Sedita III says his office is ready to prosecute as soon as he has proof that a crime was committed and evidence points to someone. As long as the official autopsy lists this as an accidental death, there is no homicide to prosecute. And, he says, there's not enough evidence to prosecute anyone for dumping the body. Sedita has advised the Buffalo Police Department Homicide Squad to keep the investigative file open.

Billittier made a persuasive defense of the county's work a few days ago, but it would be more persuasive coming from an independent observer. If the first autopsy was correct, the county should be willing to submit to another look that could put this controversy to rest.

How Amanda Wienckowski died has been in dispute for three years. Let's get to the bottom of it now with an impartial review.