

Questions in Wienckowski death need answers

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By Staff

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The problems in resolving the questions surrounding the death of Amanda Wienckowski never seem to end. New information doesn't ever seem to straighten it out; it just adds another wrinkle to the mystery of how this 20-year-old woman died four years ago and if someone is criminally responsible.

Wienckowski's frozen body was found upside down in a garbage tote five weeks after her family reported her missing. Police say the last person to see her alive was Antoine J. Garner, whom they say paid her for a sexual encounter. He has denied that she died in his presence, but police are suspicious, in part because he was just convicted of choking and assaulting a prostitute during another paid sexual encounter.

The investigation has bogged down over conflicting autopsy results, a medical examiner's report that she died of a drug overdose and newly revealed police insistence that the death was, in fact, a homicide. Meanwhile, Wienckowski's family is unable to put an end to what must be pervasive misery.

The medical examiner's report is especially puzzling. Although the local autopsy concluded that Wienckowski died of a drug overdose, a second autopsy determined the cause of death was strangulation. But because the official report blames a drug overdose – and thereby creating reasonable doubt at a trial – District Attorney Frank A. Sedita III says he cannot prosecute the case.

Police had been publicly quiet about the case, but a recently retired homicide detective broke the silence, telling The News that police never agreed with the conclusion that Wienckowski died of a drug overdose. They believe the mostly likely cause was that a large person accidentally choked the small woman during a paid sexual encounter, said retired Buffalo homicide detective Mark J. Lauber.

He said a county toxicologist told police that the cause of accidental overdose was selected merely because examiners could not find any other explanation. Lauber says the "logical" course should have been to label the cause of death as "undetermined."

That could be a start toward unraveling the mystery surrounding the death of this unfortunate woman and perhaps bringing a measure of peace to her family. Police evidently believe the death to be a homicide. Police also say there were not enough drugs

in Wienckowski's blood to cause her death, and an Albany-area pathologist agrees, saying the amount of opiates in her system was "a relatively innocuous level."

And, more: The results of the second autopsy, sought by the family, conclude that Wienckowski was strangled. An Albany-area pathologist, Michael Sikirica, agrees while yet another outside expert, engaged by Sedita to evaluate the conflicting autopsies, believes the cause of death should be changed to "undetermined."

Is there a message here?