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Cocaine blamed in man's death

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A second opinion in the police-custody death of an Orange County man says he died largely from a drug overdose, contrary to an earlier autopsy that blamed paramedics.

Strapping Gordon Randall Jones facedown on a stretcher was still a contributing factor but not the cause of his death in July, according to an opinion released Thursday by the Orange-Osceola Medical Examiner's Office.

Dr. Cyril H. Wecht, a nationally recognized forensic pathologist and lawyer, also concluded that Orange County deputy sheriffs did not contribute to Jones' death by shocking him 11 times with a Taser stun gun.

"Mr. Jones did not go into cardiac arrhythmia/arrest until at least 15 to 20 minutes after the last time he was tasered," Wecht wrote. He is coroner of Allegheny County, Pa., and president of the American Board of Legal Medicine.

"Although he had tachycardia [fast heartbeat] prior to arresting, it is my opinion that this related to his agitated state, continuing to fight against his restraints, and the presence of cocaine."

Jones, 37, died July 19 after being subdued by deputy sheriffs who were called to the Rosen Plaza Hotel on International Drive.

Jones had consumed a large amount of cocaine and run up a \$500 bar bill, records show.

Wecht's findings varied from the original cause of death set by former Deputy Chief Medical Examiner Dr. William Anderson, who cited positional asphyxia as the cause with cocaine intoxication and stun-gun shocks as contributing factors.

Deputies and paramedics had disagreed vehemently with Anderson's findings.

"I supported the medics' management of the case from the very beginning," said county Emergency Medical Services Director Dr. Salvatore Silvestri.

He said he thought from the outset that cocaine was the cause of death and had asked Orange-Osceola Chief Medical Examiner Dr. Shashi Gore to seek a second opinion.

"I concur with Dr. Wecht's conclusion as the cause of death," Silvestri said.

But Silvestri said he did not agree with Wecht that strapping Jones facedown contributed to Jones' death. Still, Silvestri will issue a new rule that will prohibit the 2,000 paramedics and emergency medical technicians he supervises from doing the same thing again.

Second opinions are sought when there is a disagreement about the cause of death. Gore said he sought the second opinion because of the high-profile nature of Jones' death.

Wecht reached his finding after studying reports by the county fire department, deputies, a medical examiner's investigator, Anderson's findings, photographs and 18 glass microscopic autopsy tissue slides, records show.

Wecht found that Jones was shocked 11 times by the Taser; Anderson had said Jones was hit 13 times. Anderson could not be reached Friday.

Wecht's finding could affect a lawsuit against paramedics that was contemplated by the Jones family, who retained a lawyer last year.

"I can't see where this would change anything. That's a bunch of malarkey," Jones' sister, Cheryl McAllister, said Friday.

Gore has not decided whether Jones' cause of death will be changed to conform with Wecht's opinion, morgue manager Sheri Blanton said. Wecht billed the county \$2,500, half his usual fee, she said.

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