

THE TAMPA TRIBUNE

Sunday

December 22, 1996

Scientologist's death A family searches for answers



Photo from the McPherson family

Lisa McPherson, left, at a Scientology ceremony her family says occurred two months before her death.

'The Lisa I know would never just lay there and die'

SUMMARY: Lisa McPherson was a vibrant woman who valued her health and was looking forward to returning home.

By **CHERYL WALDRIP**
of The Tampa Tribune

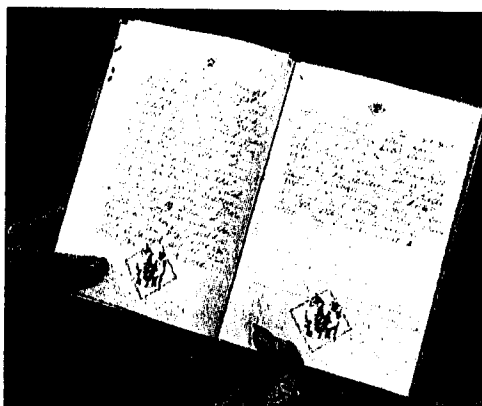
DALLAS — All her life, Lisa McPherson loved to dance.

A man twice her age could catch her eye if only he knew how to move his feet.

On and off the dance floor, McPherson rarely stopped moving. A good sales representative for a publishing company, she packed her days and nights with work, friends from the Church of Scientology, exercise, girlish flirtations and always, always, dancing.

Shortly before Thanksgiving 1995, she called an old friend and family members and said she would be coming home for the holidays. For the first time in four years, she talked with her childhood friend Kellie Davis and told her she would be moving back to Dallas by Christmas.

She also told her she would be leaving the



AP photo

A relative, who blames the Church of Scientology for Lisa McPherson's death, displays the dead woman's diary. Story, this section-19

Church of Scientology, of which she had been a member for half of her life.

"She couldn't wait to get here," Davis said.

Davis never heard from her friend again.

On Dec. 5, Scientologists took McPherson from the Fort Harrison Hotel to HCA Hospital in New Port Richey. She was dead on arrival.

An autopsy of her gaunt, bruised body showed she died of a blood clot brought on by days of "bed rest" and "severe dehydration."

"There's no way Lisa would let herself get that sick without calling her mother," Davis said. "The Lisa I know would never just lay there and die."

Lisa McPherson's 1992, 1993 and 1994 diaries show she prized her health and was a high-energy person who exercised frequently and went country-western dancing as often as she could. She kept track of her headaches, sometimes recorded her meals and visits to chiropractors and dentists.

She termed the time she "slowed down" to recover from a herniated disc the longest two months of her life.

"In a way, I may be fortunate to have gone

SCIENTOLOGIST/ Family wonders why woman died

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through this," she wrote on May 30, 1993. "I know what not having my health is like and I appreciate mine a lot more."

McPherson's mother, Fannie, her aunt, Dell Liebrich, and her old friends blame Scientology for her death.

They wonder what caused her dehydration, the bruises on her arms and legs and the abrasions and lesions, and why her body had bug or animal bites on it.

McPherson also had a staph infection, which the church says explains all of her symptoms, including the bruises.

Other relatives, who asked not to be named, also think Scientology had something to do with her death. She had come home in late 1994 weighing about 140 pounds, one cousin said.

"She was this vibrant, beautiful woman and 11 months later we were shipped this old, frail body," the cousin said.

McPherson, who was 5 foot 9, weighed 108 pounds at the time of her death at age 36. Her diary entries end in April 1994, leaving no

“
It sure was a great loss to me. There was such a bond between us. We could talk on any level.”

.....
Fannie McPherson
Lisa McPherson's mother

personal account of the last year and a half of her life.

Church attorney Elliot Abelson said the speculation about her death is "gossip."

"We care more about Lisa than they do," he said, adding she had great friends in the church. Abelson said McPherson was very involved in the church's annual Winter Wonderland display downtown.

Abelson said he could not believe an American newspaper would publicize her family's claims to "smear 8 million members of a religion."

He contends McPherson was not planning to leave the church. He said she had written letters to newspapers describing her happiness and success in Scientology.

One letter was addressed to The Tampa Tribune on April 24, 1995.

"I work for a company that has been using this technology for years, and we have continued to expand and do well as a result," McPherson wrote. "My own personal income has increased over the past five years without ever dropping, and I just got promoted because of the application of all this information."

She was asked to write that letter — and told how to write it — three days earlier.

"As before, this letter will need to be quilled back here at Valko, so when you're done, please fax it over here," said Alycia Silver of Valko & Associates. "We'll either fax it back to you with an OK to send it on or we'll fax it back with the needed corrections for you to correct and then send it on."

HOW MCPHERSON died has not been determined by authorities. Clearwater Police say her death is suspicious and they are investigating.

Police say they are still trying to locate three former church staff members for questioning. All three have left the country.

Scientology officials say the police investigation is part of a 20-year vendetta.

McPherson went to the Fort Harrison for "rest and relaxation" following a minor car accident in Clearwater on the evening of Nov. 18, 1995.

She was not injured in the accident, but paramedics thought she was "wild-eyed," police said. She got out of her car and, while walking down the street, took off all her clothes.

She was taken to Morton Plant Hospital, where a psychiatric nurse was called to interview her. Police say Scientology members arrived at the hospital and McPherson signed herself out against medical advice. The church says the hospital released her.

Church spokesman Brian Anderson said she suddenly became ill on her 17th day at the Fort Harrison.

At first, he said, she didn't want to go to a doctor, but church members convinced her she should and took her to HCA Hospital in New Port Richey. He said she asked to go there because she wanted to be treated by physician David Minkhoff, who is a church member.

Liebrich, the aunt, says she can't understand why the church bypassed nearby Morton Plant Hospital to travel miles away, given that McPherson was gravely ill. She said she asked Anderson about that and was told that's what McPherson requested.

Family members and friends also say they are suspicious because church members explained the death differently at different times.

Scientologist's death A family searches for answers

STATE OF FLORIDA
OFFICE of VITAL STATISTICS
CERTIFIED COPY
CERTIFICATE OF DEATH
FLORIDA

| | | | |
|--|---|---|---|
| 1 DECEASED'S NAME FIRST: Lisa MIDDLE: Mc LAST: McPherson | | 2 SEX Female | |
| 3 DATE OF DEATH (Month, Day, Year) Dec 5, 1995 | 4 SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER 461-94-2009 | 5a AGE LAST BIRTHDAY (Month, Day, Year) 36 | 5b UNDER 1 YEAR Days |
| 6 DATE OF BIRTH (Month, Day, Year) February 11, 1959 | 7 BIRTHPLACE (City and State or Foreign Country) Dallas, Texas | | 8 WAS DECEASED EVER IN U.S. ARMED FORCES? (Yes or No) No |
| 9a PLACE OF DEATH (Check only one - see instructions on other side) HOSPITAL: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Institution <input type="checkbox"/> Outpatient <input type="checkbox"/> ODA <input type="checkbox"/> OTHER: Nursing Home <input type="checkbox"/> Residence <input type="checkbox"/> Other (Specify) | | 9b INSIDE CITY LIMITS? (Yes or No) Yes | |
| 10a FACILITY NAME (If not institution, give street and number) Columbia HCA New Port Richey Hospital | 11 CITY, TOWN, OR LOCATION OF DEATH New Port Richey | | 12 COUNTY OF DEATH Pasco |
| 13a GIVE KIND OF DEATH (Only if death is a result of an accident, suicide, or homicide. If not, leave blank.) | 14 DECEASED'S USUAL OCCUPATION Sales Representative | 15 KIND OF BUSINESS/INDUSTRY Publishing | 16 MARRITAL STATUS - Married <input type="checkbox"/> Never Married <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Widowed <input type="checkbox"/> Divorced (Specify) |
| 17a REGISTERED DONOR OF ORGAN OR TISSUE <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No | | 18 SURVIVING SPOUSE (Last name) James McPherson | |
| 19 Cause of death (Enter the diagnosis, report, or description that caused the death. Do not over the cause of death, such as cardiac or respiratory arrest, shock, or heart failure. List only one cause on each line.) | | | |
| IMMEDIATE CAUSE (Final disease or condition resulting in death) | | Thrombo-embolism left pulmonary artery | Minutes |
| 20a | | 3 DUE TO (OR AS A CONSEQUENCE OF) | Days |
| 20b | | Thrombosis of left popliteal vein | Days |
| 20c | | 4 DUE TO (OR AS A CONSEQUENCE OF) | Days |
| 20d | | Bed rest and severe dehydration | |
| 20e | | 5 DUE TO (OR AS A CONSEQUENCE OF) | |
| 21a | | 27a WERE AN AUTOPSY PERFORMED? (Yes or No) | Yes |
| 21b | | 27b WERE AUTOPSY FINDINGS USED TO COMPLETE CAUSE OF DEATH? (Yes or No) | |
| 21c | | 27c CASE REPOWERED TO MEDICAL EXAMINER? (Yes or No) | |

McPherson's death certificate shows she died of a blood clot brought on by days of "bed rest" and "severe dehydration."

FANNIE MCPHERSON said that the day after her daughter died she was notified by a telephone call from her daughter's boss, who is a church member.

Fannie McPherson said the woman first said Lisa had become sick about noon the day of her death.

"She said she [Lisa] had fast-acting meningitis," McPherson said. "I called later and they said, no, she had a bruise on her leg and that's what caused the blood clot that went to her lung."

Anderson also has suggested the staph infection played a role in her death.

"So many stories were told it was unreal, unbelievable," Liebrich said.

Family and friends who attended McPherson's funeral say several Scientologists were there.

"We couldn't even go to the restroom without two or three of them coming with us," Liebrich said. "They were like vultures."

"From the beginning, we knew something was wrong," said Brenda Motley, who was a neighbor and babysitter for the McPherson family when Lisa was growing up.

"When we went to the funeral the next day, it was the eeriest thing I ever saw," Motley said.

"Those people were there and they were all staring at anybody who wasn't one of them. I felt endangered there. It was just the way

they looked at you. They stared holes right through you."

Liebrich said that since the circumstances of McPherson's death were first reported by The Tampa Tribune a week ago, Anderson has called the McPherson home as many as three times a day.

She considers the calls harassment. Abelson said Anderson has called the family only once.

FAMILY AND OLD friends call Scientology a "cult" and say Lisa McPherson was "brain-washed."

"Her mother and father were both against it, but Lisa was searching for something," Liebrich said.

When she joined the church in 1977, she had had more than her fair share of grief.

Lisa's teenage brother, Steve, had shot himself four years earlier and she was in a difficult marriage.

Her boss at the telephone company encouraged her to join Scientology.

The boss "told her this would really help get her life straight," Fannie McPherson said.

"Mother, I've joined a church," her mother recalls Lisa saying excitedly. "Wonderful!" her mother said.

"When she told us it was the Church of Scientology, it went right over my head," McPherson said.

She had never heard of it. Her father, James, claimed it was a cult, an idea Lisa rejected.

"She didn't see it that way," Liebrich said. Nor does the church.

LISA WAS eager for her mother to join and convinced her to come to a new member orientation.

What her mother heard was "cock and bull stories."

But to Lisa, the words made sense.

"Lisa was always starved for attention and affection," said Motley, the McPhersons' neighbor. "I think that [Scientology] was a connection for her."

McPherson's first marriage was brief, and she later married a Scientologist in the early 1980s. That marriage also failed.

Motley and other friends and family say once McPherson joined the church, she dropped out of touch and seemed distant.

"After she got involved with those people, she stayed away from her friends and family," said Helen Morris, Motley's mother.

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Lisa McPherson weighed 140 pounds in this photo taken in 1994. She was 108 pounds at her death 11 months later.

"She didn't talk a whole lot about it [Scientology]," recalls her friend Davis. "For the first time, Lisa wouldn't talk about something."

But her diaries reveal McPherson wanted people to like her.

Three years before she died, she wrote: "The past several weeks, things have been changing and I feel like I must get busy. For so long I have worried over what others thought about who I am and what I am doing. ... I've realized that it's more important what I think about me and what I am doing."

People did like her.

"She had a lot of boyfriends," her friend Davis recalls.

Her diaries show she went with friends to movies such as "The Fugitive" and "Demolition Man," ate dinner at Chili's and the Sandcastle with pals, and danced with anybody who could keep up with her at Cowboys and a club in Clearwater called Old New York New York.

The diaries reveal a generally

upbeat woman, although there are references to frustration in her work as a sales representative for AMC Publishing, which is owned and run by Scientologists.

She also fretted about her mother's health and grieved for her cat, Casper, who was run over by a car.

She got a new kitten, whose antics — including falling in the toilet — disrupted life in her peaceful apartment at 901 N. Osceola Ave.

AFTER SHE DIED, McPherson's relatives came to her apartment on Dec. 16 to take care of business.

People were carting out Lisa's belongings, including her stereo, television set, answering machine, telephone and clothes, Liebrich said.

"There was one box they didn't get to," Liebrich said. The box, tucked away in a hall closet, contained the diaries and a variety of documents.

An unsigned 1994 tax return form lists McPherson's income at nearly \$137,000.

Scientology documents the family has indicate McPherson paid as much as \$1,000 an hour for Scientology courses.

According to a Church of Scientology Parishioner Annual Statement for 1994, she donated \$75,275 "to qualified religious services."

The same document shows she made additional tax-deductible donations of nearly \$55,000 to the church.

In January 1995, she received a letter from the International Association of Scientologists Members' Trust thanking her for her tax-deductible contribution of \$2,850 in 1994.

"Because of member support, the IAS has been able to fund major dissemination actions, safeguard and protect the Scientology religion and provide grants to projects which are salvaging our society," the letter said.

DOCUMENTS ALSO show that shortly before her death McPherson ordered a \$240 set of taped lectures (with binder and glossary) by Scientology founder and science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard.

The lecture series, called "expansion of havingness," is promoted by a flier proclaiming "Billions of

lifetimes can't be all bad, unless you're living them all at the same time."

"You burned them down to the last notch, buried them, forgot them, but you still can't get rid of them," the flier says.

"And the blackened cinder of them come back to dictate your life. You want to smile, they make you yell. You want to reach, they make you shy away. You want to live ... they make you die.

"Here is the totally black, nightmarish morass that lurks in the depths of your universe. Here lies the undead residue of a billion lifetimes, the super-complex, interconnected problems that will not vanish," the flier says.

Fannie McPherson and other relatives said that after Lisa's death, church members said Lisa had want-

“

She didn't talk a whole lot about it [Scientology]. For the first time, Lisa wouldn't talk about something.”

.....
Kelle Davis
McPherson's friend

ed to be cremated. Although her mother had never heard her express those wishes, she complied with the church's request.

"So she was cremated, much to our sorrow," Liebrich said.

Her ashes were scattered over the graves of her brother and father, who also shot himself in 1983.

"It sure was a great loss to me," Fannie McPherson said of her daughter's death. "There was such a bond between us. We could talk on any level."

From time to time, Lisa's mother passes by a Dianetics office in Dallas. Dianetics is the forerunner of Scientology and also was created by L. Ron Hubbard.

"When I see those poor little things going into that Dianetics place, I want to go in there and scream 'Get out! You don't know what you're getting into.'"

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Diaries offer vignettes of Scientologist's passion for life

DALLAS — Among the few possessions Lisa McPherson's family retrieved from her Osceola Avenue apartment were three diaries, which she kept sporadically.

The following passages provide a glimpse of McPherson's personality, including her struggle to define herself, her appreciation for her health, her passion for dancing and love for her mother.

Today is Saturday, the 29th of May (1993). ... John ignited an old gas flame I thought was long ago out. I quit smoking. I loved smoking and quit in case he ever passed my way again and should want to kiss me. That says something.

I cried at Michael Bolton songs that we had never shared. I kept him in my thoughts every conscious moment. I hated sleeping because it was time away from him. ... In all the other relationships I can recall I've suffered from the same thing, which is "how can I be exactly the person you will want?" That was a miserable way to go about it. Being careful not to say the wrong thing, what a trap. So I chucked that whole idea and decided to be who I was. ...

May 30, 1993
It was January when my back started failing me. February I went to a specialist and was ordered to get an MRI. I did and discovered I had a herniated disc. I wouldn't stop dancing, and I took an oral steroid that helped ease the pain.

This has been the longest two months of my life. I am forced to slow down, and I don't like it. I'm definitely on the downhill side of it now. In a way I may be fortunate to have gone through this. I know what not having my health is like, and I appreciate mine a lot more. I learned who my friends were.

June 10, 1993
(Mom) Bless her heart, she got sick as a dog, and now she's starting over. ... We have never been closer. I love her a lot.

June 13, 1993
I went dancing at Cowboys and had a great time.

Aug. 14, 1993
Went to see The Fugitive with Bren. We ate at

Chili's first then went to the movie. I was disappointed in it, but I love Harrison Ford. ... Yesterday I had to tell my neighbor that Casper (her cat) was killed. She was as upset as I was. I miss my kitty. I think I am going to get another one. A kitten this time.

Sept. 2, 1993
The baby kitty is driving me crazy! She fell in the toilet this morning. I do not have a moment's peace at home hardly.

Sept. 6, 1993
Brenda and I went to Wild West to dance. We had a great time, I can't remember when we had more fun. I met a guy, Jerry, and we danced the night away — he was a 3 stepper. I kept up with him. I liked him because he was tall. He had a great sense of humor and seemed to like me.

Oct. 27, 1993
What an eventful 8 or so weeks! I finished my LOC last week! Yea! I got a lot sorted out on my first and

second dynamics as a result. Now I'm on NED and hope to be clear soon. I'm going to Chicago next week.

March 12, 1994
Went to New York New York (a nightclub) with the girls — had blast!

March 26, 1994
Randie did my hair, and then Gi and I went to the mall. Later went to the Sandcastle to hear Jan sing, but she didn't so I didn't stay. Randie took me dancing and WE HAD A BLAST! God this man can dance — we didn't get home until 1:00. We stayed up talking to almost 3. ...

March 31, 1994
I worked my butt off today, but it seemed like the harder I worked, the further behind I got!

April 1, 1994
I'm going through some changes at work, and that's pretty frustrating. Bren and I booked a trip to Dallas. ...

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THE TAMPA TRIBUNE

A MEDIA GENERAL NEWSPAPER

and The Tampa Times

<http://www.tampatrib.com> TAMPA, FLORIDA

Mystery surrounds Scientist's death

SUMMARY: A medical examiner's autopsy shows Lisa McPherson died of a blood clot caused by severe dehydration and "bed rest."

By **CHERYL WALDRIP**
of The Tampa Tribune

CLEARWATER — After spending half her life as a member of the Church of Scientology, Lisa McPherson told friends she was ready to get out.

At 36, she yearned to reunite with her

mom and old friends and start a new life in Dallas.

She hoped to visit them at Thanksgiving and vowed to be home for good by last Christmas.

"She said she couldn't get into it over the phone but she said she had a lot to talk about," said Kelly Davis, her friend since childhood. "She said she would explain when she got here."

To Davis, her friend sounded "like the

old Lisa," not the distant stranger she had been for a decade. The women laughed and talked as they had before McPherson joined Scientology after her high school graduation 18 years earlier.

"She had made the decision to get out and come back here and she seemed happy," Davis said.

But on Thanksgiving a couple of weeks later, McPherson was not at home. Instead, she was at the Fort Harrison Hotel, Scientology's world spiritual headquarters.

She was taken there Nov. 18 by Scientologists for "rest and relaxation."

Seventeen days later, she was dead.

An autopsy by the Pinellas-Pasco Medical Examiner's Office showed McPherson's 5-foot-9, 108-pound body was severely dehydrated, her arms and legs were bruised, her skin was cracked and scaling. Her left pulmonary artery was blocked by a fatal blood clot.

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DEATH/Questions remain on death of
Church of Scientology member

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brought on by dehydration and "bed rest."

"The Clearwater Police Department doesn't think she died of natural causes," said spokesman Wayne Shelor.

People who attended the wake in Dallas say Scientologists told them McPherson died of "spinal meningitis."

Tampa attorney Robert Johnson who represents Scientology said church members initially suspected meningitis and only later learned that was not the case.

"No one knew what had happened to her," Johnson said. He said they now believe McPherson had a strep infection. Authorities have no indication of that.

Police have questions about McPherson's death. Detectives wanted to talk with Scientology employees Suzanne Schnuremberger, Ildiko Cannovas and Laura Arrunada, but were told by the church that all three had left the country. They are still being sought for questioning.

Johnson said those people no longer work for the church and Scientology doesn't know how to locate them.

Clearwater Police Detective Sgt. Wayne Andrews said he thinks Schnuremberger is in Switzerland or Germany, Cannovas is probably in Hungary and Arrunada may be working in the medical field in Mexico. He recently asked for help locating them by posting a request for information on the Internet.

The three former employees "worked in an office that would have had control over her" during her stay, Andrews said.

Church of Scientology spokesman Brian Anderson said that is false. He said the three have no connection to McPherson's death and the investigation is nothing more than a harassment campaign against the church by police.

He also disputed that McPherson wanted to leave Scientology. "She wasn't thinking of leaving the church," he said.

ON THE EVENING of Nov. 18, 1995, McPherson was driving her Jeep Cherokee on South Fort Harrison Avenue. A motorcycle accident had stopped traffic and McPherson smacked into a boat trailer being towed by a Ford pickup.

"It was a minor accident, but paramedics at the scene said she was wild-eyed," Detective Andrews

File Edit View Favorites Options Directory Window Help

CASE # 3 - Offense # 93-29158

Victim Lisa McPherson, a white female, date of birth 2/10/59, died while being transported by several associates to a hospital in New Port Richey, Florida on December 6, 1995. Ms. McPherson's manner of death has been undetermined. The Clearwater Police Department has attempted to contact three of those associates for interviews. Thus far, all attempts to locate these individuals have been unsuccessful. The last known address of Ms. McPherson and these associates was 210 S. Fort Harrison Avenue in Clearwater. The three associates are:

1. Suzanne Schnuremberger (possible married name of Green). Information indicates that Ms. Schnuremberger may now be living in Switzerland or Germany.
2. Ildiko Cannovas. Information indicates that Ms. Cannovas may now be living in Hungary.
3. Laura Arrunada. Information indicates that Ms. Arrunada may now be working in the medical field in Mexico.

Please contact Detective Sergeant Wayne Andrews at albright@cfnet.com or (813) 462-6085 (collect if necessary) if you have information regarding Suzanne Schnuremberger, Ildiko Cannovas, or Laura Arrunada.

An Internet site asks for information on three people Clearwater police want to interview about Lisa McPherson's death.

said. "She was walking down the street and removed all of her clothes. The paramedics put her in an ambulance, and although she had no physical injuries, took her to the Morton Plant [Hospital] emergency room."

A psychiatric nurse was called, Andrews said. He said church members showed up at the hospital, said they didn't believe in psychiatry and insisted on witnessing the interview.

"There was nothing physical wrong with her, but the doctor wanted to keep her there," Andrews said. "She signed out against medical advice and left with several church members."

"She goes to 210 South Fort Harrison for rest and relaxation and the next time there's any indication of what's happening to her is that on Dec. 5, 1995, she shows up at HCA Hospital in New Port Richey and she's dead on arrival," Andrews said.

SCIENTOLOGISTS TOOK her to New Port Richey to be treated by Scientologist physician David Minkoff, Andrews said.

Scientology spokesman Anderson disputes the detective's account of the events. He said church members were not present for the interview at the hospital and that McPherson did not sign out against medical advice, but was released.

He said if she had been mentally unfit, hospital officials could have had her committed under the Baker Act, but they did not.

Anderson said she was taken to the Fort Harrison Hotel because she

“ She called me three weeks before she died and she was crying. She said she was having trouble with her sales. She said, 'Mother, I've let my group down.' ”

Fannie McPherson
Mother of Lisa McPherson

asked to go there, and there was no indication McPherson was ill until the day of her death.

"Lisa at first didn't want to see a doctor but we talked her into seeing a doctor," Anderson said. "She knew Dr. Minkoff and he is an expert in infectious diseases so that's why she was taken there."

Minkoff said the medical examiner's report is incomplete.

"There are major findings as to the probable cause of death that explain a lot about what happened," Minkoff said.

He declined to say what those findings are because medical records are confidential. He said the records are available to officials through the hospital.

If the Medical Examiner's Office looks at them, he said, its doctors will see what caused McPherson's death.

Anderson and Johnson said Minkoff's examination determined McPherson had a strep infection. An-