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Church of Scientology Charged in Member's Dehydration Death

From Associated Press

CLEARWATER, Fla.—The Church of Scientology was charged Friday in the 1995 death of a member whose family claimed that she became severely dehydrated after being held against her will for 17 days.

Prosecutor Bernie McCabe charged the church with abuse or neglect of a disabled adult and unauthorized practice of medicine, both felonies.

The church noted that prosecutors did not specifically target the church or any individual with the death.

Lisa McPherson, 36, died Dec. 5, 1995, after being under the 24-hour care of fellow church members at the church's Fort Harrison Hotel. She had been taken there to recover from a mental breakdown, but records indicated she was in good physical condition.

An autopsy showed she died of an embolism, or blood vessel blockage, in her left lung caused by "bed rest and severe dehydration."

McPherson went without fluids for at least five to 10 days and possibly for her entire stay at the hotel, Medical Examiner Joan Wood said.

"The family wants justice," said Ken Dandar, the McPherson family lawyer. "They're happy that criminal charges have been filed."

Church officials have said that the investigation is part of a 15-year effort by Clearwater officials to discredit Scientology.

"There are no allegations that anyone intentionally harmed Lisa McPherson," spokesman Brian Anderson said. "This has been a difficult investigation, and the state has operated under immense political pressure and they ultimately decided to bring a corporate negligence charge."

Church officials say McPherson was well cared for by church members but became violent and incoherent, had trouble sleeping and frequently resisted efforts to give her food, liquids and medications.

Church officials said she grew weak, lost weight and suddenly fell ill. Staffers said they drove her to a nearby hospital where an emergency room doctor is a Scientologist. She was pronounced dead 20 minutes later.

McPherson's family has filed a wrongful death lawsuit seeking unspecified damages against the Los Angeles-based church.

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 1998

Florida Charges Scientology In Church Member's Death

2-Year Investigation Leads to Felony Filing

By DOUGLAS FRANTZ

ORLANDO, Fla., Nov. 13 — Florida prosecutors filed criminal charges today against the Church of Scientology in connection with the death of a church member while she was under the care of Scientologists three years ago.

The church's Flag Service Organization, its chief operating arm in Clearwater, Fla., was charged with abuse or neglect of a disabled adult and with the unauthorized practice of medicine in the death of the church member, Lisa McPherson, 36. The felony charges were filed in Clearwater, which is the church's spiritual headquarters, by the State Attorney for Pasco and Pinellas Counties, Bernie McCabe.

Ms. McPherson, who had spent half her life as a member of the church, died on Dec. 5, 1995. She had spent the previous 17 days under 24-hour watch in a church-owned hotel in Clearwater after suffering an apparent nervous breakdown following a minor traffic accident. Church records said she had suffered dementia and had to be restrained at the hotel.

The Pinellas County medical examiner said Ms. McPherson had been deprived of water for 5 to 10 days before her death and ruled that she had died of a blood clot brought on by dehydration. The Clearwater police and the Florida Department of Law Enforcement conducted a two-year investigation, which led to the charges filed today.

Ms. McPherson's death has become a rallying point for critics of Scientology and was the subject of a long article in The New York Times last December. They contend that her death reflects the coercive nature of the church, which has been a lightning rod for criticism since it was founded 48 years ago by L. Ron Hubbard, the late science fiction writer.

Scientology has grown into a worldwide movement that boasts eight million members, although critics say the number is much smaller. The church was granted tax-exempt status in 1993 after a 25-year battle with the Internal Revenue Service.

Church officials and organizations have faced charges in foreign countries in recent years, but the charges

in the McPherson case are believed to be the first criminal accusations against a Scientology entity in the United States since 11 of its leaders were imprisoned 20 years ago for breaking into Government offices.

The Clearwater charges are similar to those brought against nursing homes accused of providing inadequate treatment to elderly patients who die in their care. The abuse or neglect charge accuses the church of knowingly or negligently causing harm to Ms. McPherson.

Church officials and lawyers have maintained that Ms. McPherson was cared for properly under Scientology's beliefs and that her death was unrelated to her stay at the church's Fort Harrison Hotel.

Laura L. Vaughan, a lawyer for the church, said the charges did not accuse the church or any of its members with intentionally harming Ms. McPherson. "There was no charge of manslaughter and no charge that the church caused her death," Ms. Vaughan said.

Kennan Dandar, a lawyer for the McPherson family in a civil lawsuit against the church, said the family was pleased by the criminal charges.

The family's wrongful-death suit against the church is scheduled to go to trial next summer.

Under Florida law, the maximum penalty is a \$5,000 fine for each charge, but courts may impose additional penalties, including forfeiture of property. Mr. McCabe and Clearwater police officials declined to comment on the charges. But an affidavit by A. L. Strobe, a special agent with the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, which was released with the charges, provided a chilling portrait of Ms. McPherson's final days.

Ms. McPherson worked as a sales representative at a Clearwater firm owned by other Scientologists. After the accident, in which she appeared to have been uninjured, she stripped off her clothes on the street and began to mumble. She was taken to a local hospital and a doctor there wanted to provide psychiatric treatment. But several church members went to the hospital and took Ms. McPherson to the church hotel. The Church of Scientology prohibits psychiatric treatment for its members.

Over the next 17 days, according to Mr. Strobe's affidavit, Ms. McPherson was hyperactive, delusional and hallucinating. He said she tried to harm herself and others and was repeatedly restrained and prevented from leaving her room.

After the first week, she routinely urinated and defecated on herself and rarely slept, Mr. Strobe said. She had conversations with people who were not there, claimed to be people she was not, sang and danced around the room as if giving a performance, crawled around on the floor, stood on the toilet, got in the shower fully clothed, tried to walk out of the room in a state of undress and on at least one occasion drank her own urine.

Mr. Strobe said Scientology staff members administered injections of magnesium chloride in an effort to get her to sleep and gave her numerous doses of vitamins, herbal sleep remedies and prescription drugs.

One staff member who treated Ms. McPherson, Janice Johnson, had been a practicing anesthesiologist in Arizona before she ran into disciplin-



Lisa McPherson died in 1995, the same year in which she was honored by the Church of Scientology.

A case that has become a rallying point for critics of Scientology.

ary trouble and let her medical license lapse, Mr. Strobe said.

Several other people who cared for Ms. McPherson also had some medical training, he said.

On the evening of Dec. 5, 1995, Ms. McPherson's condition had deteriorated to the point where Dr. Johnson telephoned a Scientologist working as an emergency room physician at a hospital 45 minutes away.

The doctor, David I. Minkoff, told investigators that he suggested Ms. McPherson be taken to the nearest hospital if she was very ill.

Instead of going to Morton Plant Hospital, which was just a few blocks away, Ms. McPherson was driven 45 minutes to the hospital where Dr. Minkoff worked. She was pronounced dead shortly after arriving.

Dr. Minkoff said he was shocked by her horrific appearance. The medical examiner later estimated that she had lost as much as 40 pounds and been without water for up to 10 days, accusations disputed by church lawyers.

Mr. Strobe said the delay in seeking emergency care deprived Ms. McPherson of her only opportunity for survival.

The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES NATIONAL TUESDAY, DECEMBER 1, 1998 + YNE A23

Scientology Pleads Not Guilty in 1995 Death

By DOUGLAS FRANTZ

CLEARWATER, Fla., Nov. 30 — The Church of Scientology pleaded not guilty today to criminal charges in connection with the 1995 death of a member whose family maintained that she had been held against her will by the church for 17 days.

A church lawyer delivered the written plea to the clerk's office for Pinellas County Circuit Court. A hearing is expected within 30 days.

Although the woman's death has been a rallying point for critics of the church, a single protester, carrying a placard condemning the church, marched in front of the courthouse today.

The church's Flag Service Organization, its chief operating arm here, was charged in the case this month with abuse or neglect of a disabled adult and practicing medicine without a license, both felonies. No individuals were charged.

Under Florida law, the maximum penalty is a \$5,000 fine for conviction on each charge, but courts may impose additional penalties, including forfeiture of property.

The charges were filed by the State Attorney for Pasco and Pinellas Counties, Bernie McCabe, in the death of Lisa McPherson, 36, on Dec. 5, 1995. Ms. McPherson had spent the 17 days before her death under 24-hour watch in a church-owned hotel in downtown Clearwater, which is the spiritual headquarters of Scientology.

An autopsy found that Ms. McPherson had died of a pulmonary embolism, or blood vessel blockage, caused by bed rest and severe dehydration. Dr. Joan Wood, the county medical examiner, said Ms. McPherson had gone without fluids for at

least 5 to 10 days before her death. Ms. McPherson also appeared to have lost more than 40 pounds, the authorities said.

Church officials have maintained that the lengthy investigation and charges in the case are the result of a 15-year vendetta against Scientology by Clearwater police and other local officials. The church says that Ms. McPherson was well-cared-for during her stay but that she became violent and incoherent and stopped eating.

Church officials and lawyers said Ms. McPherson was taken to a hospital after her condition worsened suddenly. They said their medical experts will testify that Ms. McPherson's death was unrelated to her stay at the hotel.

Ms. McPherson had been involved in a minor traffic accident in downtown Clearwater. She appeared to be

uninjured but took off her clothes and walked down the street naked. She was taken to Morton Plant Hospital, where a physician wanted to admit her for psychiatric treatment.

The Church of Scientology adamantly opposes psychiatric care, and Ms. McPherson refused the treatment. Instead, she signed herself out of the hospital and accompanied a group of Scientologists to the church's Fort Harrison Hotel.

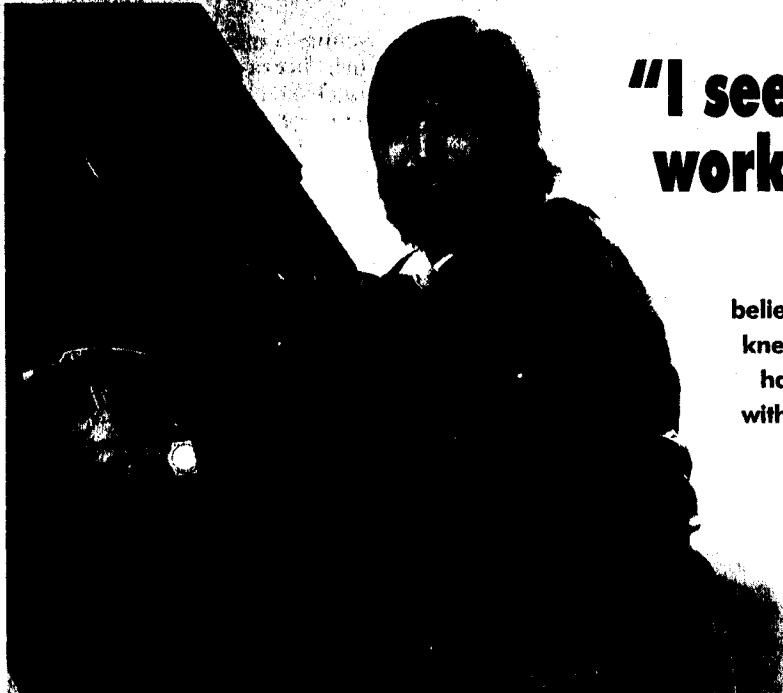
Church records show that she hallucinated, became violent and refused to eat at the hotel. She had to be restrained several times, according to accounts provided to the police by her caretakers at the hotel.

Ms. McPherson's family has filed a lawsuit against the church that is scheduled to go to trial next summer. The family is seeking unspecified damages.

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LOS ANGELES TIMES



"I see Scientology work every day."

"I went with a friend to the Church of Scientology. I didn't believe them, I didn't trust them. I knew nobody could do what they had told me. But I made a deal with the person I saw, 'I will read your book. If I like it, I will be back.' That was in 1975. Over the years Scientology has not failed to work when applied."
Rofer

Scientologists are all people who knew life could be better. They are also all people who were able to think for themselves.

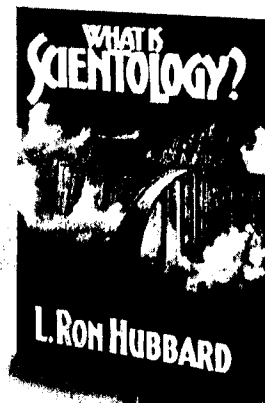
When they found out that Scientology recognizes you are a spiritual being, that it enables you to truly know what and who you are, they decided to examine it further.

And that's why so many millions of people from all walks of life in more than 129 countries are Scientologists today.

Now, armed with practical answers to the mysteries of life, they have real solutions. Workable methods to make life better. Just like they always knew it could be.

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