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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.