

State looks at suicide of patient, loss of drug aid

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State officials are investigating whether a patient who shot himself to death Wednesday at Salem Hospital Psychiatric Medicine Center was distraught over losing his mental health medication benefits.

Michael R. Shay, 37, of Salem shot himself in his room two days after he voluntarily checked into the psychiatric center, which is three blocks from the main Salem Hospital complex.

Hospital officials said they think Shay sneaked a handgun into the 24-bed facility after one of the center's social workers helped him move his car to a closer parking lot.

The Office of Investigations and Training, an arm of the Department of Human Services, is investigating Shay's death as well as whether his loss of mental health benefits played a role, said Eva Kutas, who heads the office.

Officials said Shay first sought help Monday night at the Marion County Psychiatric Crisis Center, which in turn contacted the hospital to arrange his voluntary admission.

Jeffrey Davis, administrator of the Marion County Health Department, would not discuss details of Shay's condition or treatment but said he "clearly was dangerous to himself and had had several hospitalizations" in recent years.

Psychiatric center officials said Thursday they were looking into the possibility that Shay was upset about losing his state-paid medication benefits.

"We were told that he stopped taking medicines because they were no longer reimbursed," said Tim Murphy, the hospital's administrative director of psychiatric services.

Contacted at her home in Salem, Shay's mother declined to comment about her son's death.

Shay enrolled in a limited state-paid prescription program in January but did not renew it in February, state officials said. At the end of that month, the program was eliminated as part of wide-ranging budget cuts that have left tens of thousands of mentally ill Oregonians without antipsychotic medications, counseling or residential treatment.

In the past two months, human services officials have investigated five suicides of community mental health clients thought to be linked to

statewide service cuts. The possibility was ruled out in two of the deaths, but three others, including Shay's, remain under investigation.

After determining that Shay was a danger to himself Monday, a county worker walked him to the psychiatric hospital from the nearby crisis center.

Shay, who state records show was a licensed practical nurse until the late 1990s, was admitted at 10:30 p.m. and evaluated by nurses, hospital officials said. Employees searched his possessions and clothing; took his wallet, keys and other personal items for safekeeping; and then placed him in a private room next to the nursing station.

On Tuesday afternoon, after being evaluated by a doctor, Shay told hospital staff he wanted to go to his car.

"He was concerned about where he left his car parked, which is just a couple of doors down," said Dr. Maggie Bennington-Davis, medical director of the psychiatric unit. "He was eager to get his car moved to our parking lot."

A unit social worker walked Shay to his car. They then drove the short distance back to the psychiatric center, parked and got out. But Shay "leaned back inside his car for just a few seconds," Murphy said.

Hospital officials said they think this is when Shay retrieved the gun, a .25-caliber semiautomatic handgun with a fully loaded clip.

Shay and the social worker walked back into the psychiatric center, where the worker checked in Shay's keys and wallet but did not search him again.

On Wednesday morning, Shay got up and had breakfast and, after visiting with staffers, returned to his room and closed the door, officials said. Fifteen minutes after their last regularly scheduled check of Shay, staffers heard a loud noise from his room.

"They thought he might have fallen," Bennington-Davis said. But a doctor quickly determined he had died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the right temple.

Shay did not leave a note and had not been aggressive with the staff during his stay, hospital officials said.

"We did not find (the gun) upon his initial admission," Murphy said. "He was not searched when he re-entered the building because he had been with staff the entire time."

The hospital refused to identify the social worker who had accompanied Shay to his car.

No staff members were disciplined after Wednesday's shooting, but additional security measures are likely once internal and state investigations are completed, Bennington-Davis said.

The hospital is evaluating its security procedures. For the time being, there will be no escorted trips away from the psychiatric unit, officials said.

Shay's death is the second suicide since the psychiatric center opened in 1988. Four years ago, a patient hanged himself.

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