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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.