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Saturday, December 19, 1998

# Medical examiner says angry workers 'staged' body stacking photos

HOUSTON (AP) -- Harris County's chief medical examiner acknowledges that the improper practice of stacking bodies has occurred at the county morgue, but said it appears to have been the work of disgruntled employees violating official policy.

Key Info } Earlier this week, Dr. Joye Carter denied that employees stacked bodies on top of one another when they ran out of metal trays. In a Friday Houston Chronicle story, she acknowledged the practice had occurred, but that it was in direct and sometimes intentional violation of office policy. Carter Caught In Lie } Key

Dr. Carter was performing an autopsy Friday and could not be immediately reached for further comment by The Associated Press.

The medical examiner said she is considering increasing security around the morgue to prevent further stacking -- intentional or unintentional.

"It's a shame to have to protect the bodies from within this facility," she said.

The Chronicle reported on Sunday that bodies were stacked at the morgue before and after autopsies.

The practice is a concern not only because of the lack of respect for the body, but because it can lead to contamination of evidence if the bodies are stacked prior to autopsy.

Photos of bodies being stacked were sent to the Chronicle, which led to questions about the practice. Dr. Carter contends the photos were staged.

The newspaper reported that the photographer denies staging the photos. Sheets were moved aside for some of the pictures so that toe tags could be revealed to document when the stacking occurred, the photographer said. In one instance, the photographer said, a body was removed from a stack in order to reveal the presence of an infant's body between two adult bodies. Key Info

Morgue supervisor Victor Forney said he had seen stacking in both the "outgoing" and "incoming" office coolers. But he said he agreed with Dr. Carter that the stacking was done by disgruntled employees in an effort to demean the office.

Forney said bodies are sometimes placed side-by-side when the office runs out of trays.

In those instances, he said, there would be no danger of evidence contamination because the autopsies would have been completed and the bodies would have been wholly contained within body bags.

Dr. Carter said the stacking photographs and at least five anonymous letters sent to county officials,

office employees and the media are hurting morale.

"We've had enough, and it needs to be known that the office is being harassed," she said.

Dr. Carter's office has come under frequent criticism in the past year for a series of controversies such as criminal investigations, lawsuits by two employees who contend they were fired for reporting illegal practices, the accidental cremation of a wrong body, the employment of an unlicensed physician and questions about the reliability of autopsies in several high-profile homicide cases.

Key Info

County Judge Robert Eckels said earlier this week that he and his staff would conduct unscheduled visits to the office, which Dr. Carter said she would not oppose.

"We're open any time," she said.

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