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## Pathology experts weigh in on cyanide poisoning finding

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By Rich Lord Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

A previously healthy 41-year-old professional arrives by ambulance at a hospital, in inexplicably dire health. Within a week, she has died, her organs have been harvested and the remains have been cremated. There's no public indication of an investigation -- or of her apparent cause of death, cyanide -- until a week later.

Inexplicable? Not really, according to longtime forensic pathologists, including two who are involved in the case of Autumn M. Klein, the UPMC and University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine researcher whose April 20 death has spurred an investigation. An unusual -- albeit notorious -- poison like cyanide can escape detection until autopsy, and even sometimes thereafter.

"If you have reason to believe ... that drugs may have been involved [in a mysterious failure of health], then you would move toward a drug screening," said Cyril Wecht, the former Allegheny County coroner. "But I do not believe that you would be doing a cyanide test. I don't believe that is going to be ordered, that anybody is going to be thinking about cyanide."

Dr. Wecht said he has been hired by Jerry Johnson, the attorney representing Robert J. Ferrante, Dr. Klein's husband. Neither Mr. Johnson nor Mr. Ferrante could be reached Saturday.

Barring the telltale, but not universal, signs of the smell of almonds and reddened skin, would a doctor likely order a cyanide test on a struggling patient?

"Not off the bat, probably not," said Sanford H. Edberg, also a former county coroner and a former medical examiner for New York City. "If everything else is negative, then you usually start thinking of more esoteric [possibilities], like cyanide."

Dr. Klein was the chief of her division at UPMC, a leading researcher into the treatment of neurological problems during pregnancy, the wife of a professor of neurological surgery and the mother of a 6-year-old daughter. The manner of her death hasn't been determined, and county Medical Examiner Karl Williams said Saturday that he is awaiting toxicology reports.

Pittsburgh police confirmed Wednesday that toxic levels of cyanide were found in her system. Officers, with the FBI's assistance, searched the family's Oakland home Friday evening, removing a computer and vacuum cleaners, plus towing cars. The bureau had no update Saturday.

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samples aren't refrigerated and have too much air in the top of the tube, cyanide can evaporate into the airspace and leak out of the tube when it is opened, making a poisoned blood sample look clean.

The fact that the deceased was cremated might affect investigators' ability to probe further, said Dr. Edberg. "You might want to go back and do further tests on the body," he said. "You might want to test the hair samples for instance. You might want to test the bone."

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Rich Lord: [rlord@post-gazette.com](mailto:rlord@post-gazette.com), 412-263-1542 or Twitter @richelord. Staff writer Mark Roth contributed.

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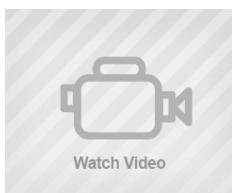
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