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Poisoning Is Suspected in Woman's Death

Fresno authorities are working the 5-year-old 'cold case' hard after reviewing the findings of a private inquiry.

By Daryl Kelley
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It's been five years since Linda Adanalian, 37, collapsed on the steps of the Fresno church where she was married, curled into the fetal position and passed out as her four young children cried for help.

She lived long enough to tell an emergency room doctor that she hadn't been sick until that day and had never before had chest pains. Finally, terrified and gasping for air, she whispered: "I'm dying."

The Fresno County coroner, after years of dispute about the cause of death, finally ruled that the former cheerleader and college athlete had died from a rare case of selenium poisoning. But the death was not declared a homicide. And no criminal charges were filed.

Now, Fresno police and prosecutors say they are working the onetime "cold case" hard after a separate and private investigation by a retired district attorney concluded that she was poisoned by her husband to end their troubled 13-year marriage.

Since his wife's death on Feb. 11, 2000, Mark Adanalian, 52, who owns a carpet business, has denied killing her. In a recent interview, he said he had nothing to hide.

"My wife wasn't killed; she died," he said. "She took pills. She had a heart attack.

"This stuff is all put out by my in-laws," he added. "They've made my life miserable for five years."

Fresno Police Chief Jerry Dyer has assigned his top homicide detective to the case and is awaiting new scientific studies of evidence.

Fresno County Dist. Atty. Elizabeth Egan said she has a senior prosecutor and investigator working on the case, and wants to assign her top homicide prosecutor to it after she is done with a trial.

"I expect in the next few months to determine whether or not we have enough to go forward with a filing or to a grand jury," Egan said.

The Linda Adanalian file was one of several cold cases picked for reexamination early last year after Dyer created a special one-detective unit to try to solve the most promising, or troubling, of the Fresno Police Department's more than 300 open homicides, officials said.

Cause of Death Changed

Police said they began to focus on the case after the coroner changed the cause of death in June 2003 from undetermined to "acute selenium toxicity." Selenium is a nonmetallic chemical element that the human body needs in trace amounts but which can be lethal in high concentrations.

Then, last summer, three veteran prosecutors, including retired Fresno County Dist. Atty. Edward Hunt, asked Dyer to kick the investigation into gear.

Acting on behalf of Linda Adanalian's family, they gave Dyer a new investigative report that pointed to the man the young mother had told others she feared would kill her.

"The facts demonstrate beyond a reasonable doubt that Mark Adanalian is responsible for his wife's murder, and he must be held accountable," retired Ventura County Chief Deputy Dist. Atty. Lela Henke-Dobroth said in her 88-page analysis.

Henke-Dobroth investigated the case at the request of her former boss, retired Ventura County Dist. Atty. Michael Bradbury, who had been asked to review it by a leading advocate for crime victims. Bradbury, in turn, enlisted the support of Hunt. The former prosecutors said they were not paid for their services.

In recent weeks, prosecutor Egan said she received a copy of the report as well.

Mark Adanalian, a talkative man who struggles to walk because of multiple sclerosis diagnosed in 1998, limited his comments on the advice of attorneys.

Lawyer Donald Fischbach, who represents Mark Adanalian in a dispute with his wife's parents over visiting their grandchildren, wrote to The Times: "Mark Adanalian did not kill his wife, nor did he have anything to do with her death. We do not believe that there is any evidence which links him to her death."

Just what killed Linda Adanalian remains in dispute, Fischbach said in an interview,

regardless of the 2003 ruling of newly elected county coroner Lorelee Cervantes that the young mother died of selenium poisoning. The previous coroner, Dr. Mark Hadden, had ruled that the cause of death was unknown because experts disagreed, he noted.

"I don't know how you can charge somebody with murder when you have different opinions as to cause of death," Fischbach said.

From the start, the mysterious death of Linda Adanalian, an apparently healthy Fresno elementary schoolteacher turned stay-at-home mom, raised questions. She had told family and friends that if anything happened to her, they should consider her husband a suspect, according to the Henke-Dobroth report.

Less than a month before her death, she allegedly told two friends over dinner that "Mark is like O.J. Simpson," nice to the outside world but a frightening bully in his own home, the report states.

Five months before Linda Adanalian's death, she also told her sister Meg Bakich that a family therapist had warned her that her husband was dangerous, according to the Henke-Dobroth report.

"Linda called me and said: '[The psychologist] told me Mark has the capability of killing me and the children, and if I decided to leave, he would testify that Mark should have only supervised visits with the children,' " Bakich recalled in an interview, recounting information in the Henke-Dobroth report.

Attorneys for Mark Adanalian said the psychologist, Thomas Granata, has denied making such statements in a confidential report that is part of the grandparents' visitation case. Granata refused comment to The Times.

But if Linda Adanalian told others that her husband was hostile and threatening, Warren Paboojian, the best man at the couple's wedding and now one of Mark Adanalian's attorneys, said Linda, not Mark, "was the one who had the rage."

After one fight, "I said, 'Linda, if you're so unhappy, why don't you just leave him?' And she said, 'I can't, my mom and dad won't let me.' "

Six weeks later, Linda Adanalian, though suffering from extreme weakness and stomach pains all day, took her children to a Disney ice show at a downtown Fresno arena, not far from the Armenian church where she collapsed at 9:30 p.m. and died about two hours later.

ER Doctor Surprised

The emergency room doctor later told her family that he was surprised at her husband's lack of emotion, which prompted him to ask Mark Adanalian if his wife had any prior symptoms, Henke-Dobroth reported. The husband said no, the doctor told Linda

Adanalian's family. But about 30 minutes later, Mark Adanalian told the doctor he remembered that his wife had experienced chest and left arm pains for two or three days, according to accounts by Linda Adanalian's family and hospital charts, Henke-Dobroth reported.

Mark Adanalian's lawyer Paboojian, whose wife and children were with Linda Adanalian when she collapsed, also was at the emergency room. He remembers Mark Adanalian "was in shock. He kept asking me, 'She's dead? Linda's not dead?' " And he could hear Mark Adanalian crying over his wife when he viewed her alone, Paboojian said.

In the days following Linda Adanalian's death, friends and family were shocked by her husband's callous and oddly gleeful conduct, Henke-Dobroth reported.

Shortly after her death, Linda Adanalian's family said her husband taunted them by carrying her \$100,000 life insurance policy in his pants pocket. He practiced his golf swing next to her open casket at a viewing before funeral services. When one of his wife's best friends arrived from Chicago for the funeral, he quipped, "It's too bad you are married. I'm single now," the woman allegedly told family members.

A sister-in-law maintains that while she was comforting Linda Adanalian's 6-year-old son, Mark Adanalian entered the room to declare that he already had talked with the children about "what kind of new mommy" they would like to have.

"While the house was flooded with grieving family and friends, offering their condolences, Mark stood in the center of the room, boisterous and loud, telling stories that he thought were funny, and making derogatory comments about 'how Linda was,' " Henke-Dobroth reported.

But Paboojian remembers a husband who grieved privately. "People mourn differently," he said. "Sometimes they don't show it outwardly.... He was on edge and upset, at least with me."

Then there was the question of why a metal filtering system Linda Adanalian used when making her coffee turned up missing the day after her death, Henke-Dobroth reported.

Drops of concentrated selenium — readily available on the Internet — could have been placed in her morning coffee, the former prosecutor said.

"There are documented cases of poisoning in just this manner," she wrote, including an Orange County homicide fictionalized in a TV movie, "Lethal Vows," and shown on CBS four months before Linda Adanalian's death.

As for motive, Henke-Dobroth noted that in addition to \$100,000 in life insurance, the husband stood to receive his wife's substantial teacher's retirement account. He also would not have had to split the value of his home and business upon divorce, or to pay child support.

"I'd just left Linda 10 days before she died; she was scared," sister Meg Bakich recalled in an interview. "Then my parents called and told me what had happened. My first words were, "Oh my God, he killed her."

Outside Help Enlisted

Since her death, Linda Adanalian's family has spoken with police and the coroner's office, gathered potential evidence, hired a private investigator, posted a website and enlisted the help of former prosecutors because they thought authorities were doing little to solve the case.

In turn, lawyer Paboojian has insisted that stress may have triggered a heart spasm that killed Linda Adanalian. (The American Heart Assn. reports that the leading cause of death of adult women in all age groups is heart disease.)

The whole case against his client rests on the finding of selenium poisoning, said Paboojian, a former prosecutor. And that case would fall "like a house of cards" under cross-examination in court, he said.

After Linda Adanalian's sudden death, nearly two dozen physicians, toxicologists, lab consultants and other experts offered opinions about the cause.

Early on, a cardiac pathologist said the most likely cause of death was a heart disorder, and the reason there was no damage to the heart was because the coronary spasm came on so quickly.

Following exhumation of the body, and a second autopsy, numerous toxicologists concluded that selenium poisoning could have killed her, or did, Henke-Dobroth reported. But at least one toxicologist disagreed, as did three selenium experts, two of whom were chosen by the coroner's office for independent analysis. Finally, Dr. Albert Sui, the forensic pathologist who conducted both autopsies, concluded in 2001 that Linda Adanalian died of selenium poisoning and called for a homicide investigation.

But his boss, coroner Hadden, was less certain: "We are left then with a sudden death that may be due to selenium toxicity, a cardiac condition, a combination of both or some other unknown condition," he wrote. "I want a greater degree of certainty of scientific testimony and evidence.... "

A year later, new coroner Cervantes agreed with Sui and changed the cause of death to selenium poisoning. But she did not rule it a homicide, saying that "social and family information" provided by Linda Adanalian's family "although compelling, is circumstantial."

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