



Wednesday » March  
21 » 2007

## Online drugs proved deadly

B.C. Coroners Service believes woman was poisoned by tainted pills she obtained from Internet

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A few days before she died just after Christmas, Marcia Bergeron started losing her hair and had blurred vision -- telling friends on Quadra Island that she feared she was coming down with the flu.

It was only later that those investigating her death discovered the truth: She had slowly been poisoned.

But this is no murder mystery.

The B.C. Coroners Service announced Tuesday that it believes Bergeron, 57, was poisoned by tainted pills she ordered online from a bogus Canadian pharmacy.

Rose Stanton, regional coroner for Vancouver Island, said Bergeron's death is believed to be the first in Canada from tainted pills ordered on the Internet, and the coroners service is worried it might not be the last.

"We're often the tip of the iceberg," said Stanton. "She's not the only one buying pills off the Internet."

Stanton said most of the sites, marketed towards bargain-seeking U.S. customers, pretend to be Canadian, when in fact they are often located overseas, and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has issued several warnings about bogus Canadian sites.

The sites also change website addresses every few days, making tracing them difficult, said Stanton.

"They all claim a Canadian legitimacy," she said. "But if you start looking deeper, you find that neither the company names or affiliations they mention are actually legitimate."

Ken McCartney, deputy CEO of the B.C. Pharmacy Association, warned British Columbians against dealing with online pharmaceutical sites "because you have no idea where in the world they operate."

Consumers are unable to determine whether Internet pharmaceutical suppliers are subject to regulation or inspection.

McCartney said his group encourages people to "develop a relationship with their local pharmacist because they are knowledgeable and accessible" and regulated by the College of Pharmacists of B.C.

Bergeron's body was discovered by a neighbour on Dec. 27, about a day after she

died, said Stanton.

More than 100 generic pills were found in her home. Some were in clear plastic bags, others were loose -- and none of them were labelled.

Toxicology tests conducted on the pills revealed many of them contained dangerously high levels of heavy metals which had apparently been used as filler.

"Our toxicologist wasn't sure what was going on," said Stanton. "There was strontium and uranium and lead -- things in these drugs that shouldn't have been there. ... Some of these [materials], in any quantity, are lethal. You ingest it and you die slowly over time."

Stanton said her office has been able to determine, by looking at Bergeron's computer, that she ordered pills from an Internet site about a month before her death -- and that they likely arrived about a week later.

However, Stanton said investigators are still not sure what Bergeron thought she was taking.

The actual medicine detected in the three types of pills -- an anti-anxiety drug, acetaminophen and a strong sedative -- are not consistent with those usually ordered online, like antidepressants or Viagra.

"The bogus Internet sites I have looked at don't advertise the drugs we found," said Stanton.

However, the sedative has been linked to overdose deaths in other countries and is not legally available in Canada.

She said police and the coroners service continue to investigate Bergeron's death and should have more information to release in the coming weeks.

Marlene Stevens, a friend of Bergeron on Quadra, said she last saw Bergeron at church Christmas Eve.

"She was ringing bells at the service," she said. "She looked a little pale. But Marcia didn't get out in the sun much so I thought she was tired."

Stevens said Bergeron suffered from severe arthritis and allergies -- but was skeptical of traditional medicine.

"She wasn't into pills -- she was more into the natural way," said Stevens. "She went to a homeopath."

Bergeron moved to Quadra Island about eight years ago from Ohio and was living alone on a fairly generous pension, said Stevens. "She was a really good person -- soft-spoken, very gentle."

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