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2 dentists accused of 'professional incompetence' in principal's death

State suspends dental licenses of brothers involved in fatal root canal procedure

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Routine root canal operations are almost never fatal, but a cascade of elementary mistakes led to the death of a school principal from Skokie last year, according to state officials who Friday suspended the dental licenses of the two brothers who performed the procedure.

Putting more information in patients' hands may be the best defense against such rare incidents, experts say. No one can anticipate every flaw in a dentist's practice, but patients have every reason to check a dentist's record with the state and to ask how staffers would deal with an emergency.

"Patients should take the time to do some research," said Dr. Mary Hayes, a dentist in private practice and a spokeswoman for the Chicago Dental Society.

Georgette Watson, 46, went into cardiac arrest and died last December while under sedation for a root canal procedure in the Lakeview offices of brothers Joseph and Laurence Feldman. Watson was the principal at Brentano Math and Science Academy in Chicago.

An Internet search of state records would have shown that regulators already had disciplined the two dentists, who also had offices on the South Side. But the previous incident, involving substandard crown and bridge treatment, did not approach the "professional incompetence" that led investigators to suspend the licenses Friday.

Investigators said the dentists did not get a proper medical history from Watson before putting her under sedation and did not adequately monitor her blood pressure, pulse and other vital signs during the procedure. They also gave her too high a dose of two painkilling medications, and personnel in the office did not have the right training for cardiac pulmonary resuscitation and other emergencies that could arise from sedation, officials said.

"Such conduct poses an imminent danger to the public," concluded the petition for suspension issued by the Illinois Department of Financial and Professional Regulation.

The Feldman brothers could not be reached for comment. They will have a chance to appeal the action at a hearing Aug. 13; final action could range from a reprimand to revocation of their licenses, a department spokeswoman said.

Such glaring mistakes are rare among the 17 million root canals performed each year, and only 25 of the 9,945 licensed dentists in Illinois have been disciplined this year for inappropriate care or other infractions. But two recent high-profile cases in Chicago—Watson's and the death in 2006 of 5-year-old Diamond Brownridge after a routine procedure—have raised concerns about safety.

Experts said dentists who administer powerful sedation must be prepared for emergencies, and some are not.

Dr. Andrew Herlich, a professor of anesthesiology at the University of Pittsburgh who has a dental degree, said many dentists' offices do not practice how they would respond to an emergency.

"Rarely do I see an office that knows how to handle an emergency well," said Herlich of the American Society of Anesthesiology.

Patients who are to be sedated are justified in asking who will monitor them, what kind of training they have, and what the staff's precise response to an emergency would be, Herlich said. Dental offices typically are not equipped to provide extensive emergency care, he said, so getting paramedics to the scene immediately is crucial.

"One question you should ask is, what's the first thing the staff will do if you get into trouble with the sedation," Herlich said. "The correct answer is, 'Call 911.' If they can't answer that, you should not proceed."

Patients also should ask whether powerful sedation is absolutely necessary, said Susan Hofer, a state spokeswoman.

Lawyers for Watson's surviving son, Henry Jones, said they are close to reaching a financial settlement with the dentists over her death. A petition to preserve evidence in the case, which Jones' team filed in December, stated that during the procedure the dentists noticed Watson's oxygen level was falling and her breathing was irregular. The dentists then administered drugs to reverse the sedation and tried to give cardiopulmonary resuscitation, according to the petition.

An autopsy by the medical examiner's office found Watson died of the sedation drugs, with hardening of the arteries as a secondary cause.

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