The Viral Lowdown: Prison Death Prompts Probe

Treatment for TB she never had killed HIVer

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PWA Rosemary Willeby's three-year stint at California Correctional Women's Facility (CCWF) turned into a death sentence, and now friends say that a prison doctor should be behind bars -- for manslaughter.

Last year, the 47-year-old Willeby's health was stable. Combo therapy had made her viral load undetectable, but she had liver-damaging hepatitis C. Despite this, CCWF's Augustine Mekkam, MD, claiming that Willoughby had "tuberculosis symptoms," switched her to four anti-TB meds, including the liver-toxic isoniazid. When a belated TB test came up negative, all drugs were stopped. But the damage was done. Friends watched helplessly as Willeby's liver deteriorated. Within six months she was dead, her bloated belly the size of a basketball.

While medical care for caged PWAs is routinely substandard, an outbreak of the airborne TB wreaks havoc with order and budget, so anti-TB meds are a top priority. Judy Greenspan of the HIV in Prison Project reports that six other CCWF HIVers died last year, and she was contacted by others who say they were not only misprescribed TB meds but threatened by Mekkham with retaliation if they complained.

CCWF's Rhonda Frost told POZ the women's claims were "ridiculous" and denied charges against Mekkam. At press time, the California legislature had convened a hearing at CCWF to hear prisoner testimony about medical care. After the first day, state Sen. Cathie Wright said, "What I heard today curdled my stomach."

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