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Parents sue Nashville forensics company over jail death

Birth defect blamed; parents say son beaten

By Brian Haas • THE TENNESSEAN • November 27, 2010

The parents of a Memphis teen who died after being restrained in a Rutherford County jail have filed a lawsuit against the Nashville forensics company that ruled his death natural.

The suit seeks at least \$3 million in the death of Andron Reed, 18, from Forensic Medical, the company that was contracted to perform autopsies for the state of Tennessee. In it, Reed's parents accuse Forensic Medical of "deceitful and untrue statements and dishonorable professional conduct" in investigating Reed's death. In a separate federal lawsuit, the Reed family is suing the Rutherford County Sheriff's Office, saying his death was caused by "excessive and traumatic" restraints.

Attorneys for both sides could not be reached Friday. Forensic Medical has not yet responded to the latest suit. Officials with the Rutherford County Sheriff's Office have denied that Reed was improperly restrained or beaten when he was arrested.

Reed died Aug. 15, 2009, at Middle Tennessee Medical Center in Murfreesboro after what authorities said was a combative night with jail deputies. The prior night, he was arrested on charges of DUI, felony evading arrest, felony reckless endangerment, violation of implied consent, assault and speeding after he was clocked driving 86 mph in a 70 mph zone on Interstate 24. Police said he and his brother fled a Tennessee Highway Patrol trooper at speeds of up to 106 mph before wrecking on an exit ramp.

Authorities said Reed fought troopers and jail deputies while he was being booked. According to the Reeds' lawsuit, deputies restrained him with a restraint chair with straps against his chest, a mesh "spit hood" over his face, handcuffs and leg shackles. The suit said deputies sprayed him with pepper spray at least three times.

The lawsuit also accuses deputies of beating Reed

while restraining him.

Reed was then left in a cell for 10 minutes, the suit says. A nurse who checked on him couldn't find a pulse.

Within about 20 minutes, he was rushed to the hospital, where he died.

Death was ruled natural

Forensic Medical, a Nashville-based company that was contracted to be medical examiner for the state of Tennessee and Nashville, ruled his death natural, caused by a birth defect in his heart. The report indicated there was no evidence that deputies had beaten Reed.

The Tennessee Bureau of Investigation investigated his death, but no charges were filed.

Reed's death set off a wave of questions about the sheriff's office. Social justice groups such as the NAACP in November 2009 held a forum to address a perceived pattern of misconduct with the office, using Reed's story as one example.

Forensic Medical no longer performs autopsies for the state after its former president was arrested on a marijuana charge in Mississippi. Former Chief Medical Examiner Bruce Levy also was charged with official misconduct in Tennessee because some of the drugs came from an evidence locker. Levy last week pleaded guilty to the misconduct charge and went into a diversion program. If he follows the terms of the programs, his criminal record in both

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states will be expunged.

Forensic Medical continues to perform autopsies for Nashville, but Levy no longer works there.

Reach Brian Haas at 615-726-8968.

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