

Care center hit on deaths

By ELLEN TUMPOSKY

Daily News Staff Writer

A state watchdog group has found serious deficiencies in the care received by five mentally disabled patients who died last year at the Terence Cardinal Cooke Health Care Center in Manhattan.

Among the problems cited in the report of the state Commission on Quality of Care for the Mentally Disabled was a failure to order medical tests, inadequate monitoring of patients and delays in transferring patients to hospitals.

The report examined the deaths of four children and one adult at the center, which houses about 150 severely disabled people, many of them children. Many of the patients cannot walk or talk, are mentally retarded and have seizure disorders.

'Serious breakdown

The facility is operated under the auspices of the New York Archdiocese.

"It's clear there was a serious breakdown," said Gary Masline, a spokesman for the commission. "Doctors and nurses working in this field know how medically frail these children are."

In response, Patricia Cahill, acting president of the Cooke Center, said, "The center has developed a set of procedures designed to accommodate the changes the commission suggested."

She also said center officials disagreed with some of the commission's judgments on medical procedures, but said they are committed to providing high quality care to what she termed a difficult type patient to care for.

The adult who died, Lisa Cartwright, 31, was profoundly retarded and weighed only 67 pounds.

According to the report, doctors did not order a medical workup on Cartwright until she had been running an intermittent fever for three weeks. Tests found she was suffering from a respiratory virus. She continued to run a temperature that went as high as 104 degrees, and on March 17, 1989 — more than a month after she began running a fever — a doctor noted that she was dehydrated. He recommended force-feeding her fluids, but this was not done.

The next day she was moved to Metropolitan Hospital, where she died four days later.

The report criticizes the center for failing to run tests quickly, for failing to take a chest X-ray, for failing to consider using a drug effective for the virus she had and for moving too slowly to transfer Cartwright to a hospital.

In the case of Liana Poe, 10, the report finds the center failed to follow up on an incident of respiratory distress that occurred three days before she was found dead.

A third patient, Shaban DeJesus, 17, began to show signs of internal bleeding on March 30. His doctor waited until the next day to transfer him to St. Clare's Hospital, where he died.

In four of the five cases, the commission faulted the Cooke center's internal reviews of the deaths. "It abdicated its responsibility to insure the future well-being of its clientele and the quality of its services by failing to address obvious shortcomings in the care of clients under review," the report said.