

NCRC Discloses Actual Cause in Death Mistakenly Reported as a Fatal Dog Attack

NCRC does not rely solely on news accounts. Whenever possible, NCRC conducts personal interviews with police investigators, animal control officers, coroners, forensic pathologists, veterinarians, health department officials, dog owners, and eye witnesses. We obtain incident reports, bite reports, human and animal autopsy reports, summaries of judicial proceedings, and crime scene data.

NCRC followed up the story of Carolyn Baker, after it had been out of the news cycles for three months. The result of our investigation demonstrates why initial news accounts cannot be relied upon as the sole source of fatal dog attack data. Here is what we learned:

Date: February 7, 2010
Location: Cuyahoga County, Ohio
Victim: Carolyn Baker, 63 yr. old female

Circumstances:

Carolyn Baker, who had previously suffered both a stroke and a heart attack, put on a pair of boots and walked out to her family's detached garage late at night to let the dog, Zeus, into the house for the night. Usually, another family member brought the dog in. However, no one had done so on this particular night.

Ms. Baker, who was wearing only a thin polyester nightgown in the 20-degree cold, could only move with difficulty, given the state of her health. She usually did not navigate the icy stairs down to the driveway and the 50-foot walk to the garage.

About 3 a.m. that Sunday morning, a next-door neighbor called the family to tell them Zeus was in the Baker's front yard barking. Carolyn's husband, Ricardo Baker, let Zeus in the front door. He noticed that Carolyn was not in the house, and that the back door was open. He found her at the bottom of the back steps, motionless and bleeding. He called for help, and she was taken to a local hospital, where she died approximately 2 hours later.

News accounts:

On its Sunday news broadcast, *WKYC TV News* quoted Cleveland Heights police as saying "Baker had severe arm and shoulder injuries and bite marks."

On Monday morning, February 8th, the *Sun News* reported, "A woman died after being attacked by the family Rottweiler-mix dog yesterday morning on Woodridge Road. According to police, Carolyn Baker, 63, died after being attacked by the dog."

INVESTIGATIVE REPORT



The *Columbus Dispatch* also carried a story headlined, "Cleveland Heights Woman Killed by Own Dog."

However, while the *Plain Dealer* reported that Baker "died after being found with bite marks on her body;" they also reported the family's belief that "Carolyn had a heart attack or stroke" and that the injuries inflicted by Zeus were in an attempt to rouse or "pull her to the house."

On February 11th, the *Sun Press*, which had originally reported Baker's death as a dog bite fatality, now reported that, "the cause of death [was] still unknown."

19ActionNews.com reported February 13 on Ms. Baker's funeral services under the headline, "Funeral Services for Pet Owner Found Bitten in Driveway."

After that, no further stories appeared in the Ohio media.

NCRC Investigation:

NCRC called the Cleveland Heights Police Department in April, but was informed that Ms. Baker's autopsy report was not yet available. NCRC called the Department again on May 13. The department then referred us to the Cuyahoga County Coroner's Office. The coroner informed us that Ms. Baker's death was due to cardiovascular disease, not to trauma caused by dog bites. The contributory factors, according to the coroner, were hypothermia, subcutaneous soft tissue injury (claw marks), and blunt force impact to the head and extremities not related to dog bites.

We were informed that there were no bite marks on Ms. Baker.

The Coroner's Office had completed its report by March. No other government agency or news outlet has inquired as to the state of the report, or requested a copy.

Results of Investigation:*

Manner of Death:	Accidental
Cause of Death:	Cardiovascular disease
Contributory Factors:	Hypothermia Subcutaneous, soft tissue injury (from claw marks) Blunt force impact to head and extremities

*Source: Interview with Cuyahoga County Coroner's Office, May 13, 2010
Autopsy Report