

## NCRC Discloses Actual Cause in Death Mistakenly Reported as a Dog Bite-Related Fatality

NCRC does not rely solely on news accounts. Whenever possible, NCRC interviews 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 on the case of Ethel Horton, who was initially reported to have died from a dog attack and later reported to have died from a heart attack associated with dog bites. The result of our investigation demonstrates why initial (and even follow-up) news accounts cannot be relied upon as the sole source of fatal or non-fatal dog bite data. Here is what we learned:

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**Date:** March 4, 2010

**Location:** Lee County, South Carolina

**Victim:** Ethel Horton, 64-year-old female

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### **Circumstances:**

On March 4<sup>th</sup> Jerry Horton, who had previously suffered one or more strokes, went out to his backyard, where multiple dogs were maintained on chains. A dog belonging to Horton's nephew attacked him. Horton's wife Ethel went to his aid, and beat the dog off with a plastic pipe, whereupon Horton was able to get away. He was later taken to the hospital with non-life threatening injuries. Ethel Horton died at the scene.

### **Initial news accounts, March 4, 2010, report a dog bite-related fatality**

*WLTX News* headlined the story, "Pit Bull Attacks, Kills 65-year-old Lee County Woman"

The stories from *Associated Press*, *The Times and Democrat*, and *Lake Wylie Pilot* were headlined, "SC woman killed in attack by relative's pit bull." The first line of each story reads, "A South Carolina woman who was helping care for her nephew's pit bull died after she was mauled..."

### **Follow-up news accounts, March 5-6, 2010, report the correct cause of death, but ...**

The news reports became confused after the autopsy results were released. The news media now reported a different cause of death, while clinging to the idea that the dog had severely injured her:

*WIS 10 News*: "Woman killed in pit bull attack died of heart failure."

*The State* went with the headline, "SC woman mauled by pit bull died of heart attack."

## NCRC Investigation:

NCRC contacted the Lee County Coroner in an effort to determine if dog bites had contributed to the death of Mrs. Horton. Lee County Coroner Alford Elmore, who is the Director of the Hancock Elmore Hill Funeral Home, informed us that he had not performed the autopsy. The body of Mrs. Horton had been sent to Newberry County.

In the Necropsy Report (#FA10-147) completed by Newberry Pathology Associates, P.A.; Dog bites are not listed as either an immediate or an underlying cause of death.

Mrs. Horton's immediate cause of death was "cardiac arrhythmia and cardiomegaly." (Roughly speaking, cardiomegaly is an enlarged heart, and usually considered an indication of severe heart problems.)

Listed as other significant conditions contributing to death, but not as an underlying cause, was "stress from dog attack."

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## Results of Investigation:\*

Manner of Death:	Accidental
Cause of Death:	Cardiac arrhythmia and cardiomegaly
Contributory Factors:	Stress from dog attack

\*Source: Newberry Pathology Associates report