

# ER SUN

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## Mentally ill man's suicide drives review of policies

Family says schizophrenic should have been committed to hospital

BY KIM PEMBERTON

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The Vancouver Coastal Health Authority is reviewing the criteria for committing people to hospital against their will in light of the 2008 suicide of a man who suffered from schizophrenia.

The authority says it will meet with provincial mental health leaders to come up with clear definitions under the Mental Health Act to determine when committal becomes an option.

An authority spokeswoman said patients can be committed when they become a danger to themselves or others, but advocates for schizophrenics say doctors can and should intervene earlier, when their condition substantially deteriorates.

The critics said the response to their call for an independent review was "weak," and they doubted the authority intended to make any real changes.

Marek Kwapiszewski, 54, jumped off the Granville Street

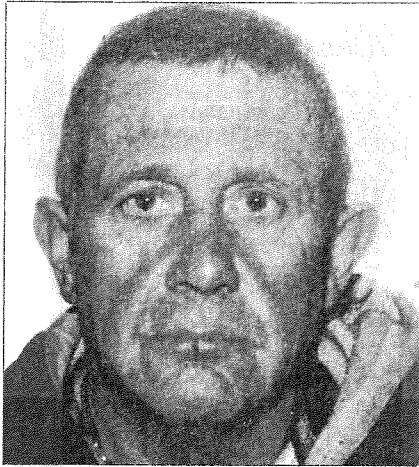
Bridge on June 29, 2008 — a tragedy his family feels could have been averted if health authorities had responded to their repeated requests to have the 54-year-old involuntarily committed to hospital.

Whenever there is a suicide in its jurisdiction, Vancouver Coastal Health conducts an internal review. But in this case, Kwapiszewski's sister and the North Shore Schizophrenia Society requested — and got — an independent external review into when a doctor or psychiatrist should commit a person who refuses help.

"The issue is, when do you determine the mental deterioration of a person [is cause for committing him or her]?" Vancouver Coastal Health spokeswoman Anna Marie D'Angelo asked.

"We can't impose treatment except in limited circumstances. It's a doctor or psychiatrist's call."

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Marek Kwapiszewski a few days before he died (top) and in happier times.

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## Suicide drives review of policies

She said that under the Mental Health Act, the criterion for committal is whether the person poses a danger to himself or others.

D'Angelo said the North Shore Schizophrenia Society believes the call should be made earlier and that the family should have access to more private information about patients from health officials.

"We feel clients have a right to privacy," she said. "It's a balancing act. We value family involvement in people's care up to the point where it doesn't interfere with their privacy."

The problem, North Shore Schizophrenia Society executive director Cheryl Olmey said, is that health professionals ask "whether the person is posing an immediate danger to themselves or others," and by that time, "it's often too late to avert tragedy."

Society president Herschel Hardin said that in Kwapiszewski's case his sister, Halina Haboosheh, and her lawyer tried 16 times in the 20 months before his death to have him committed, without success.

"Involuntarily admission is the caring way to get people the help they need because they can't help themselves," said Hardin, adding that Kwapiszewski was suffering from classic symptoms of schizophrenia, such as paranoia and disorganized thinking, but refused to seek medical treatment for his deteriorating condition.

Haboosheh said her brother was living in a car and had lost \$250,000 he had inherited, likely to people who took advantage of his confused mental state.

She said her brother "did okay on medication, but off meds he couldn't handle things."

Haboosheh said she was hoping for a proper review into her brother's death and felt the response by Vancouver Coastal Health was "so weak I don't think they're really planning to do anything."

Hardin said he believes the health authority is misinterpreting the legislation.

"A psychiatrist should know deterioration when they see it. The problem is, they don't understand section 22 [of the Mental Health Act]," he said. "Dangerousness is often used as the threshold [for committal, but] the criteria is not dangerousness, it's to prevent 'substantial mental and physical deterioration.' Most people don't know that."

D'Angelo said the external review's recommendations, made by an independent lawyer and a psychiatrist, are confidential, but the health authority's responses are not.

She said the authority is studying the Adult Guardianship Act, which was initially set up for seniors living alone who were deteriorating, to ensure they received support if they were refusing help.

"We're looking to see if this act can apply to people with mental illness so you can step in and help them," she said.

About one per cent of the population of B.C. suffers from schizophrenia, according to the North Shore Schizophrenia Society.