NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

NEW YORK POST, SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 4, 2001

Hosp anhrax victim did handle mail

By FARRAH WEINSTEIN and ANDY GELLER
in New York and DEBORAH ORIN *in D.C.*

Kathy Nguyen, a stock clerk who died mysteriously of inhalation anthrax, sometimes handled the mail at the hospital where she worked, a hospital executive revealed yesterday.

"She occasionally dealt with mail. That was not her primary job," Terence O'Brien, executive vice president of Lenox Hill Hospital, told reporters at Nguyen's wake.

Lenox Hill owns Manhattan Eye, Ear and Throat Hospital, where the 61-year-old Vietnamese immigrant was an employee for 10 years.

O'Brien said that until a few weeks ago, there was a mail-sorting area in the basement stockroom where Nguyen worked.

Last week, Mayor Giuliani said there was no indication Nguyen handled mail, and Dr. Steven Ostroff of the Centers for Disease Control said her case was puzzling because "there's no clear linkage with the mail."

Officials of the mayor's office, the city Health Department and the CDC did not return calls seeking comment.

Nguyen's death remains a mystery because anthrax tests at her apartment and at the hospital have so far been negative.

But CDC officials are beginning another round at the most promising sites and expanding to other places where she might have been.

Two NYU Medical Center experts, Drs. Marc Siegel and Eric Racklow, have suggested Nguyen became infected through cross-contamination of the mail — handling a letter that came in contact with an anthrax-laced letter.

O'Brien made his comments when questioned by reporters from The Post and Japan's Mainichi newspaper at the wake for Nguyen, who died Wednesday.

Anguished friends and co-workers bade a tearful goodbye to the hospital worker, remembering her as a gentle soul who loved to cook for them.

"My God! My God! Why? Why? Why?" sobbed neighbor Josepha Richardson as she stood in front of Nguyen's closed casket at the Ortiz funeral home in The Bronx.

"She was a beautiful person."

Anna Rodriguez, who knew Nguyen for 22 years, agreed, saying, "If only more people in the world were like her."

Meanwhile, in Trenton, N.J., a neighbor of a man arrested Friday as an illegal immigrant said he saw the man carrying a Ziploc bag containing several letters. The man was holding it away from his body and "placed it real slow" on the passenger seat of his car, the neighbor said.

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