

Carbon dioxide gas killed three rescuers

Laboratory tells coroner

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Preliminary reports indicate that carbon dioxide, not methane gas, killed the three rescuers and critically injured eight-year-old Benjamin Walker during the weekend tragedy in Lancaster Township.

The boy had fallen into a septic tank, and workers entered the tank to save him. They could not save one another, however.

Officials from the national medical services laboratory in Willow Grove, Montgomery County, informed Dr. Witlaw Show, Lancaster County coroner on Wednesday that blood samples from the three victims contained no traces of methane or hydrogen sulfide.



BENJAMIN
WALKER

Investigators had believed initially that those two gases, which are also found in farmers' silos, resulted in the deaths and injuries.

"The preliminary report which I received... Indicated that they died from inhalation of carbon dioxide," Show told a reporter. "This was based on analysis of blood samples taken at the autopsies."

Carbon dioxide, Show was told, is formed from the decay of organic matter, such as grass clippings. Grass clippings had been thrown into the septic tank at 161 Hamilton Road, home of Dr. and Mrs. Jon G. Walker.

Show said breathing in carbon dioxide would cause suffocation, similar to repeated breathing into a plastic bag containing no fresh air. As expelled carbon dioxide is re-inhaled, oxygen left in the body is displaced, causing cardiac arrest and death.

The laboratory analysis, Show said, indicated that no oxygen remained in the blood of the three victims.

Dr. R. Dobbins, a botanist and professor of biology at Millersville State College, said carbon dioxide, or CO₂, is the likely result from decomposition of vegetative matter.

Had the septic system also contained traces of human waste, the nitrogen from the human waste would have combined with gases given off from the decay of grass and leaves to produce methane gas, the substance found in silos.

Dobbins is certain hydrogen sulfide, another lethal gas mentioned as a possible killer of the men, would not have been found in the septic tank.

"It's a very, very smelly gas----one of the most stinking guesses, like rotten eggs," said Dobbins. "If that would have been a problem, (the rescue) workers would have smelled it or choked."

Dobbins said carbon dioxide is chemically different from carbon monoxide, although both gases would have the same effect on the human respiratory system.

Meanwhile, tearful mourners paid tribute Wednesday afternoon at the interment of the last of the three gallant rescue workers who died.

Bruce H. Ditlow, 24, a St. Joseph Hospital paramedic, was buried at Conestoga Memorial Garden after he was eulogized by the Rev. Richard Connor as being among "a long line of martyrs and saints who followed Jesus."

The service for Ditlow at the First United Methodist Church of Millersville followed a similar emotional remembrance for Ditlow's best friend Kevin L. Weatherlow, 22, who also died in Saturday's tragedy.



BRUCE H. DITLOW

KEVIN L. WEATHERLOW

JEFFERY W. JONES

The third victim, Bausman firefighter Jeffrey W. Jones, 18, was buried Tuesday.

All three perished during the Saturday afternoon incident to which scores of rescue workers responded.

The youngster remains in critical condition at the Hershey medical Center. He was unconscious when admitted, and hospital personnel have not disclosed whether he has made any progress.

Two others were also injured from inhaling the gas: Ross Deck, a Lancaster City police officer, and Mark Rhinier, 18, a Wheatland Fire Company firefighter, both of whom have been released from Lancaster General Hospital.

Hundreds of family members, friends and even strangers gathered at the church to mourn the loss of Ditlow's life. Ambulance attendants, most clad in their white uniforms and wearing black armbands, wept openly at the loss of their comrade.

The best friends----Ditlow served as best man at Weatherlow's wedding----were both buried at Conestoga Memorial Garden.

Weatherlow is survived by his wife, Sharon, and young daughter, Kristin.

A memorial service for the three was scheduled for 4 p.m. today at Sacred Heart Catholic Church on the 500 block of W. Walnut St. It had been scheduled for the St. Joseph Hospital Chapel but a larger sanctuary was secured in anticipation of hundreds of worshipers.

In the only other development, Ann Koenig, St. Joseph Hospital spokesman, said a trust fund established in the name of Sharon and Kristin Weatherlow had received a "couple of hundred" donations. The dollar amount has not been made public.



A memorial brick was placed at the Lancaster County Public Safety Center Memorial Park on the 30th Anniversary of the line of duty death of Bausman firefighter Jeffery Jones.

St. Joseph's Hospital Paramedics Bruce Ditlow and Kevin Weatherlow also died in an attempt to rescue 8-year-old Benjamin Walker from a septic tank along Hamilton Road in Lancaster Township.

This article was reproduced June 13, 2011 by LT. Greg Leaman of the Lancaster Township FD on the 30th anniversary of the Line Of Duty Death of Bausman Firefighter Jeffery W. Jones.

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BAUSMAN
STATION 6-1

WHEATLAND
STATION 6-9



JEFFREY W. JONES
JUNE 13, 1981
"LEST WE FORGET"

HE GAVE HIS LIFE SO ANOTHER MAY LIVE