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Woman dies at dental office: School principal getting root canal

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Taking a break from her busy job as principal at Brentano Math and Science Academy, Georgette Watson would wander into the preschool room next door to her office. Jumping up and down, she would declare: "I want to be in preschool!"

"She would get all the kids excited," said Jenab Patel, a Brentano preschool teacher. "She really understood young children."

On Tuesday, Watson's students, colleagues and friends mourned the death of their principal, who had an ever-present smile and enthusiasm that infused their Logan Square school. Watson, 46, died Monday during a root canal at a dentist's office in Chicago's Lakeview neighborhood.

Experts said that more than 17 million root canals are performed every year in the U.S. and that a death during the procedure is highly unusual.

"I would think that she had to have some kind of underlying health problem," said Dr. Christopher Wenckus, chief of the department of endodontics at the University of Illinois at Chicago. "Healthy people just don't die from heart attacks."

Watson, who lived in Skokie, was pronounced dead at Advocate Illinois Masonic Medical Center at 11:08 a.m. Monday, a Cook County medical examiner's office spokesman said. She went into cardiac arrest about 10:30 a.m. at the offices of Feldman & Feldman DDS, police said.

Autopsy results on Tuesday were inconclusive, pending further studies, according to the medical examiner's office.

The dentists who performed the root canal on Watson -- brothers Laurence W. Feldman and Joseph D. Feldman -- expressed their condolences in a prepared statement: "Words alone cannot measure the grief and sadness we feel on the sudden loss of Georgette Watson. We, too, are overcome with emotion while recalling past visits where we experienced her wonderful ways and charm."

A root canal is a procedure to save an inflamed or infected tooth. Dentists remove damaged tissue inside the tooth, disinfect and fill the area, and then seal it off.

Both dentists had their licenses placed on probation for 18 months starting in July after the Illinois Department of Financial and Professional Regulation alleged that a "crown and bridge treatment"

performed by their office was substandard. They were also cited for poor record keeping. The two men did not admit guilt in their settlement.

It was the first and only disciplinary action taken against the two dentists, said agency spokeswoman Sue Hofer. As a result of the disciplinary action, both dentists are required to take continuing education classes. They are currently in compliance with the terms of their probation, she said.

Joseph has been licensed in Illinois since 1975; Laurence since 1966. The men operate a joint practice with an office in Lakeview at 3423 N. Broadway and in the South Shore neighborhood at 2456 E. 79th St. State regulators are investigating Watson's death.

A police source said Watson received twilight sedation, which put her in a state between unconsciousness and being awake. Patients typically are groggy and can talk and are aware of their surroundings. Watson had the same procedure in December 2006 on a different tooth with the same sedation with no adverse effects, police said. It was done at the same location, but it's unclear whether it was the same dentists.

Thirty minutes into Monday's procedure, the Feldmans noticed irregular breathing and a drop in her oxygen level, police said. Both dentists tried unsuccessfully to reverse the twilight sedation, he said. The two dentists are properly licensed to sedate patients, state officials said. Police said they don't know at what point Watson became unresponsive, but said office staff tried to revive her before paramedics arrived.

Wenckus said endodontists -- dentists who specialize in root canals -- "almost always" use a local anesthetic to perform root canals on adults. Local sedation, typically Xylocaine, blocks nerve impulses inside the tooth so the patient doesn't feel pain. General anesthesia or deep sedation carries more risks because the person is unconscious.

The American Association of Endodontists said Tuesday that root canal procedures are safe when administered by appropriately-trained dental professionals. "As with any medical or dental procedure, there is a certain amount of risk," the Chicago-based group said, "so it is important to speak with your dental professional about any existing or previous health conditions, current medications and allergic reactions."

Last year, Diamond Brownridge, 5, died four days after she slipped into a coma after being oversedated at a Little Village neighborhood dental office. Diamond was having two cavities filled and caps placed on her front teeth when she was deprived of oxygen due to the anesthesia. The Brownridge family settled a \$1 million lawsuit with Dr. Hicham Riba, the dentist involved in the case. Riba's dentistry license was suspended for 18 months.

The death prompted a new state law that will take effect next month, which requires dentists to obtain a permit to perform deep sedation. On Tuesday, it was an emotional day at Brentano, where faculty members cried and consoled one another in the hallways.

Watson worked at Brentano for about 25 years, starting as a special education teacher and then becoming an assistant principal in 2000. In 2003, she was appointed principal of the kindergarten through 8th grade school.

Faculty described Watson as a strict but compassionate administrator, who passed out stickers that said "Principal's Favorite" and greeted students with a camcorder on the first day of school. On Halloween, she dressed as a fairy and helped choreograph dances for a school talent showcase this week.

"I had a lot of fun with her," said Max Quinones, 14.

Neighbor Lynn Orman Weiss said Watson lived alone and was planning to throw a party on Saturday to celebrate the completion of her home remodeling.

"She brought such a vibrancy to this neighborhood," Weiss said. "Every time she left the house she looked like she stepped off the cover of a magazine, but she was just as beautiful inside."