

Knox County Medical Examiner: 'It was not a heart attack'

Early Monday afternoon, Knoxville Police Chief Phil Keith announced that he'd just gotten word that autopsy findings show that Andre Stenson died of a heart attack. He and other city officials said this exonerates KPD of responsibility for his death Jan. 9.

Knox County Medical Examiner Dr. Sandra Elkins says Keith's interpretation of her report is incorrect.

"I got very upset at that (statements by Keith and by Fraternal Order of Police President Ed Mitchell). In my written statement, I tried to explain what it was. It was not a heart attack. Mr. Stenson had a very rare heart condition; one I have only seen twice in about 900 autopsies. You can be born with this defect and not die from it. But sometimes people with this defect, in the setting of extreme physical and emotional response, can die from the defect. ... This form of death is very comparable to literally being scared to death."

Elkins, who has not examined the officers involved, has no opinion of Keith's contention that they were injured more severely than Stenson, whose injuries she describes as two scalp lacerations and a swollen eye. While she says the blows to the head did not kill him, she isn't willing to say they were inconsequential:

"If I had those two scalp wounds, I would think they were very significant."

Elkins says Stenson was 5-8 and weighed 180 pounds, contrary to descriptions reportedly circulated by Mayor Victor Ashe estimating his weight at 240 and his height at more than 6 feet.

Elkins says Stenson's toxicology reports came back negative to cocaine, with a "trivial" amount of alcohol – well under any accepted standard for legal intoxication – and a "possible" trace of marijuana. "The marijuana metabolite is not absolutely confirmed and will be retested," she says. The only drug shown in the drug screen in any significant amount is atropine, which is used during resuscitation attempts to restart the heart.

– Written by Betty Bean, January 1998