

The Star-Ledger

Paterson cop cleared after suspect died in a hospital

By Blake Nelson

NJ Advance Media for NJ.com and The Star-Ledger

Published Dec. 30, 2019

Paterson cops were cleared of wrongdoing after a man they arrested earlier this year died in a hospital, the state attorney general's office announced Monday.

The man's death was ruled accidental and one officer's use of pepper spray was "justified," said Thomas Eicher, director of the state Office of Public Integrity and Accountability.

The 25-year-old Fair Lawn man, Steven Sherlock, died after he was involved in a St. Patrick's Day bar fight, police said.

Officers arrived at Duffy's Bar and Tavern in Paterson early on March 17. They found Sherlock struggling beneath security guards after he knocked another man unconscious, according to a news release.

An officer ordered Sherlock, who police said smelled like alcohol, to show his hands. When he did not, the cop sprayed Sherlock with pepper spray, handcuffed him and took him to St. Joseph's University Medical Center in Paterson.

The news release did not name the officer who sprayed the pepper spray.

Sherlock continued to resist, first refusing to leave the police vehicle and later laying on the ground and refusing to stand, police said. He was eventually taken inside, where he tried to attack hospital staff and security.

He died at the hospital, almost an hour after officers left, officials said.

Sherlock's death was caused by "coronary artery atherosclerosis with cardiomegaly," according to the release. That means one of Sherlock's main blood vessels for the heart had narrowed. That condition, which can be caused by a build up of plaque, can lead to a blood clot, according to the Mayo clinic.

Sherlock had an enlarged heart, according to the medical examiner's office, and alcohol further weakened his body. His death was also partially caused by "excited delirium," a broad condition related to agitated and sometimes violent people, according to a 2016 journal article.

Police force did not contribute to Sherlock's death, officials said.

Paterson police did not immediately respond to a request to comment.

The attorney general's office investigates whenever somebody dies in police custody, which included Sherlock's stay in the hospital. If investigators believe an officer's actions deserve more scrutiny, they present what they've found to a grand jury. In this case, after interviewing witnesses, watching surveillance footage and conducting an autopsy, state officials decided the case should not be presented to a grand jury, officials said.

Earlier in the year, Paterson officers were also cleared after the death of Jameek Lowery, another man with a medical condition who died in the hospital after interacting with police.

Officials said at the time that they would review "if any administrative action or training should be undertaken as a result of the manner in which this incident was handled."