



Monika Simpson (middle, with brother Harold and sister Petra) seeks answers as to why her mother died.

"It seems we copped the bill for the drug that was used to end Mum's life," says Monika Simpson (on May 4 in Sydney).

QLD NURSING HOME DEATHS

OUR FIGHT FOR JUSTICE

After the sudden death of their 'amazing' mum, three siblings were shocked to learn what killed her



Though her mother was 84 and in a nursing home, her death late last year came as a heartrending shock to Monika Simpson. Grandmother-of-nine Charlotte "Lottie" Paluszak had been suffering no pain at the Carinity

Fairfield Grange nursing home in Townsville, Queensland, and despite having dementia, her physical health was fine. "She was in good spirits," Simpson, 61, tells WHO. "Mum had a wicked sense of humour and even though she was suffering from dementia, she still had a joke with us." But having been told their mum had died from diabetes in November, Simpson and her siblings, Petra Andersen and Harold Paluszak, were delivered a bombshell. "We got a bill for morphine that was used the night she died," Andersen, 54, tells WHO. "There were large amounts prescribed. It didn't seem right."

It wasn't. Following a complaint from a staff member, authorities are now investigating five deaths at Carinity, including Paluszak's, which were allegedly caused by procedural breaches. Three nurses have been sacked and a doctor has been reported to the Office of the Health Ombudsman. Disturbingly, the nurse who allegedly administered Paluszak with a lethal dose of drugs was described as acting "strange" at the funeral, performing a dance near the coffin.

"This whole thing has been horrific," says mother-of-two Simpson. "It's bad enough we were grieving the loss of our mother when we thought she'd had a peaceful death. To be told



Charlotte "Lottie" Paluszak "still had quality of life," says her daughter Petra Andersen.

'NOT HER TIME'

At the time of her death, nursing-home resident Charlotte Paluszak showed no sign of ill health. "We thought it had been Mum's time," says daughter Petra Andersen. "But it seems it wasn't. We could have had more time with her."

The residences at the Carinity Fairfield Grange nursing home in Townsville, Queensland.

that someone may have been responsible was like a slap in the face."

At first, Carinity seemed like the dream choice for Paluszak's children. After the death of her husband, Wilhelm, a builder and painter, Paluszak, a homemaker who had also run a boarding house, lived with Andersen for two years, but when she showed signs of dementia, "we looked for a place in a nursing home," says Simpson. "Carinity was brand new and it had what appeared to be great programs. Petra is an aged-care nurse and she was impressed so we thought we'd found the perfect place."

It is a decision that now haunts the family. On the night before her mum died, Simpson received a phone call from a staff member at Carinity explaining her mother was "in and out of consciousness."

Up until then, the German-born Paluszak, who immigrated with her husband to Victoria in 1959, had been well and had a healthy appetite, even "stealing" someone's toast at breakfast, said a nurse. With Simpson away at the time, mother-of-four Andersen kept a bedside vigil with her mum. Says Simpson: "Later that night, they told us Mum was in a coma and she wouldn't make the weekend."

At some point the day before she died, an unnamed nurse administered a lethal

dose of the opiate morphine and the sedative midazolam. Paluszak, who had suffered from type-2 diabetes, died on Nov. 11. Says Andersen: "We were told she died from dementia-complicated diabetes."

It wasn't until a staff member took their concerns to CrimeStoppers that the real cause of death, and the suspicious deaths of other residents, came to light. "The next we knew, detectives were at Petra's door," says Simpson. And in a bizarre twist, the nurse in question attended Paluszak's funeral and took photos of the coffin, say witnesses. "And

apparently when they brought the coffin through a staff guard of honour, she did a kind of happy dance," says Andersen. "It's horrible if that's true."

According to a statement, Carinity has launched an investigation. "We lodged a report with the Office of the Health Ombudsman," said a Carinity spokesperson in a statement provided to WHO. "We also reported three registered nurses for breaching Carinity's clinical policies and procedures. All three were dismissed."

It's not enough for Paluszak's children, who say the nurse in question has not been deregistered and is free to work elsewhere. "Mum was an amazing woman," says Simpson. "She loved Australia, she found her better life here." And she relished helping those in need. While running her boarding house, "she was always looking after the people who stayed there," says Simpson. "And when she retired, she worked with Meals on Wheels and looked after Dad."

It's the sort of nurturing care that was cruelly lacking in her final years, in the place where it was most needed. "The system is broken if these things can happen," says Simpson. "Six months after the event we are still seeking answers."

■ By Lesley Johns and Michael Crooks



'AWFUL' FAREWELL

During the funeral for Charlotte Paluszak in Townsville, the nurse who is alleged to have administered a deadly dose of medication to Paluszak was seen acting in a "creepy" manner, according to some witnesses. "The awful thing is when we were made aware that the nurse in question was taking photos

of Mum's coffin," says Paluszak's daughter Petra Andersen. Andersen was also told the nurse "danced" as the coffin was wheeled past Carinity staff members who were standing in a guard of honour. In the image above the nurse can be seen at the back. Says Andersen: "We didn't see that, but others did."