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Official Investigates Cruise Ship Death

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FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. -- A medical examiner was investigating Wednesday the death of 76-year-old man during a virus outbreak that sickened 679 people on a trans-Atlantic cruise.

Dr. Joshua Perper, Broward County's chief medical examiner, said an autopsy was performed on David Lee Fitzgerald of Tarpon Springs on Monday, but it will take several months to complete lab tests and determine an official cause of death.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control was trying to track down the source of the Nov. 3-19 outbreak aboard the Liberty, a Carnival Cruise Lines ship. Preliminary tests identified the source as the highly contagious norovirus, but the cruise line said the death was not related to the illness, Carnival spokeswoman Jennifer de la Cruz said.

"This is definitely a case of public health interest," Perper said.

Two passengers died during the cruise, but Carnival said privacy laws prohibit them from identifying the men. One of the men was not a U.S. citizen and his body was returned to his home country before the ship docked in Port Everglades on Nov. 19, de la Cruz said.

The second passenger was identified by relatives as Fitzgerald, who was on the cruise with his wife, Martha. He died in the ship's infirmary on Nov. 10. The family said Fitzgerald was taking medicine for past heart troubles but had been cleared to travel by his doctor.

"We would like to know exactly what happened to him," Fitzgerald's daughter, Susan Lyster, told the St. Petersburg Times. "All we know is that he went to the infirmary three times with vomiting and diarrhea. We know he had a virus and he died. We don't know the cause of death."

Carnival said neither death was related to the virus, which had infected several guests before they boarded Nov. 3 in Rome and then spread to 536 guests and 143 crew members.

"It is the opinion of our medical professionals that heart-related issues were the primary factors in both deaths," de la Cruz said in an e-mail statement.

Perper said it too soon to say what caused the deaths.

"The question is what were the symptoms preceding the heart problems," Perper said.

Norovirus is a group of viruses that cause stomach flu symptoms such as diarrhea, vomiting and stomach cramps, according to the CDC. The illness usually lasts one to two days without any long-

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term health effects. It spreads through contaminated food or liquids, by touching contaminated surfaces or objects and then placing that hand in one's mouth, or through direct contact with someone who is infected and showing symptoms.

The Liberty was set to sail from Port Everglades on Wednesday on an abbreviated cruise to Key West and Cozumel, Mexico. The cruise was shortened so crews could spend two days disinfecting the ship.

The Liberty, which made its maiden voyage in July 2005, is one of the world's largest cruise ships, with 13 passenger decks and room for 2,974 travelers.

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On the Net:

Carnival Cruise Lines: <http://www.carnival.com/>

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Information from: St. Petersburg Times, <http://www.sptimes.com>