

Agents Face Penalty in Inmate Death

MICHAEL J.
SNIFFEN

Dec. 7, 1999 7:53 PM ET

WASHINGTON (AP) _ The Justice Department inspector general reaffirmed Tuesday that a federal inmate committed suicide in an Oklahoma cell in 1995, but recommended discipline for four federal officers who allegedly lied during investigations of the death.

Although rejecting allegations of a coverup, the inspector general criticized the Bureau of Prisons' response, the FBI's investigation and the FBI's handling of evidence in the death of Kenneth M. Trentadue on Aug. 21, 1995 in the Federal Transfer Center at the Oklahoma City airport.

Trentadue was found hanging in his cell, but his brother, Jesse, believes he was murdered by guards who tried to make the death look like a suicide. Trentadue's estate is suing federal agencies and officers.

Published reports have suggested the inspector general's report might raise questions about the FBI's investigation of the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building in April 1995.

But a 15-page summary released Tuesday did not question the FBI's handling of bombing evidence, and officials said the problems cited probably did not extend to the handling of bombing evidence. The full 206-page version remains secret while officials delete grand jury and privacy information.

In its most serious criticism, the summary said, "Three BOP employees and one FBI employee made false statements under oath to their supervisors, to various investigators or to the Office of the Inspector General in this matter."

None were named, but the report said a Bureau of Prisons lieutenant admitted misstating when he notified the FBI about the death.

These four were referred to Justice's criminal division for possible prosecution, but it declined to charge them. The inspector general now has recommended their agencies impose "significant discipline" for "serious misconduct."

The inspector general joined the Oklahoma County district attorney and the state medical examiner in concluding Trentadue killed himself by hanging. A federal grand jury had found no evidence to refute that.

Scott Adams, attorney for Trentadue's estate, said the government in its conclusions appears to be continuing an effort to "put square pegs into round holes."

The summary said the autopsy showed Trentadue's wounds could have been self-inflicted and none were defensive, he was alive when hanged and had not been drugged. FBI tests did not find anyone else's blood on items taken from the cell.

And no credible inmate or officer witness saw or heard any beating in the special unit where Trentadue was held alone in a cell, the summary said. The unit's guards passed polygraph tests.

But the inspector general criticized guards for observing and videotaping Trentadue hanging in his cell for at least six minutes before entering and for declaring him dead without trying to revive him. Prison officials were criticized for

cleaning the cell before the medical examiner saw it.

The FBI's initial investigation was called "significantly flawed." Agents took days to interview witnesses and months to collect physical evidence. These flaws were "too numerous and too fundamental" to have resulted solely because the bombing investigation was draining office resources, the report said.

The FBI "mishandled various pieces of evidence," the summary said. The sheet that covered Trentadue's body was stored improperly and had putrefied by the time the FBI Laboratory examined it. The FBI mislaid photo negatives and there were problems in documenting "the chain of custody of evidence."