
Police: Car left running in garage caused couple's deaths

Coroner: Carbon monoxide killed William, Eugenia Thomason

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A Greenville husband and wife have died after they were found unresponsive in their bed on June 9. Police say a car left running in their garage killed them -- and keyless ignition may have contributed.

The couple's friends asked police to do a welfare check on William Thomason, 76, and his 71-year-old wife, Eugenia, at their home on Crescent Avenue when they didn't show up for normal Sunday activities.

After the couple were found and transported to Greenville Memorial Hospital, police asked for assistance from the Greenville Fire Department, and investigators determined that elevated levels of carbon monoxide were inside a car in the garage on the first level of the home.

Greenville police Lt. Jason Rampey said the vehicle had run continuously until it ran out of gas.

"Those fumes made their way into the home's AC system, circulated through the home and they succumbed to the carbon monoxide poisoning," Rampey said.

Fire inspectors said the vehicle is a Toyota Avalon.

William Thomason died Saturday. Eugenia Thomason died Monday. The autopsies showed they both died from brain injury caused by carbon monoxide.

L.C. Dendy, with the Greenville Fire Marshal's Office, said, "Once it gets into your bloodstream, it begins to eat away at your vital organs -- your heart, your brain -- and it just depletes those areas of their oxygen."

Eugenia Thomason's brother, David McCuen, said his sister had hearing loss, so she likely would not have heard the car running. It was not immediately known if the car had been started remotely by accident or had been left running after use.

McCuen said his three major concerns are that the car was easy to start and forget, that everyone should have carbon monoxide detectors and that everyone should have a living will. He said if his sister and brother-in-law had not had living wills, they would not have been left on life support.

Similar cases reported elsewhere

After a Boca Raton couple died in their bed from carbon monoxide that seeped in from a car in their garage in March 2012, the Sun Sentinel reported that cars with keyless ignition had been linked to carbon monoxide deaths and injuries in at least four states.

In one case in New York, a former college professor survived accidental carbon monoxide poisoning in 2009 that killed her partner, but she was left with brain damage and must use a walker. A lawsuit on her behalf brought against Toyota, the parent company of Lexus, says the incident was caused by a keyless ignition feature on his client's Lexus that allowed her to start her car from a distance and leave it running without knowing it.

In another Florida case in 2010, a 29-year-old woman died and her boyfriend barely survived after she accidentally left her Lexus running in the garage of their townhouse.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has proposed a rule to standardize the length of time required to use a keyless control to a half-second, and it would require that engines or propulsion systems shut down in one full second.

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