

Russian Health Ministry Opens Probe as Another Cancer Patient Commits Suicide

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The 65-year-old patient reportedly was not able to obtain painkillers.

Russia's Health Ministry has ordered an investigation into the suicide of a pancreatic cancer patient who reportedly had not been able to obtain painkillers, the Interfax news agency reported Wednesday.

The 65-year-old patient, nuclear scientist Alexei Kalagin, committed suicide in his apartment in northeastern Moscow, the tabloid news agency LifeNews reported Wednesday. He had reportedly written a suicide note that said there was nothing with which he could assuage his pain.

The Health Ministry's press secretary, Oleg Salagai, told Interfax that minister Veronika Skvortsova had ordered the country's Federal Service for the Supervision of Health Care to look into the circumstances surrounding the incident.

A recent string of suicides among cancer patients has sparked debate about the country's health care system and the availability of painkillers. The issue received extensive media coverage last year after former Rear Admiral Vyacheslav Apanasenko, a cancer patient, shot himself and said in a suicide note that he had not been able to obtain painkillers.

More than 10 cancer patients took their own lives in the Moscow region in February, including a professor who hanged himself in his classroom, media reports said.

Moscow's deputy mayor for social issues, Leonid Pechatnikov, denied Wednesday that Kalagin had been unable to obtain painkillers, RIA Novosti reported.

Pechatnikov said earlier that the vast majority of the suicide cases among cancer patients reported on were not linked to their medical condition. At the time of Apanasenko's suicide, the municipal official said that the wave of suicides could be explained by the "aggravation of psychiatric disorders" caused by changeable spring weather.

The State Duma amended legislation in December to extend the validity of prescriptions from five to 15 days and broaden the list of facilities that can dispense medication intended for cancer patients. The law comes into force in July.

A hotline was opened in April to enable people to report violations in the prescription of painkillers, and received some 300 calls within a month, Interfax reported.

The coverage of cancer patients' suicides has also been marred in controversy. In March, Russia's media watchdog ordered a religion-themed website to delete material about why cancer patients were committing suicide. A controversial law enacted in 2012 bans online content advocating suicide and drug use, among other things.

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