

WOODFORD/LEYTONSTONE: Brakes to blame for lift death



The Orchard Estate

A FAULTY brake system led to the death of a devoted mother who was crushed in a lift accident.

Christine Allen was killed when she stepped into a lift and it shot up and trapped her as she tried to escape.

Members of her family were at Walthamstow Coroner's Court today where they heard the verdict that Mrs Allen died as the result of an accident.

Emotional relations were clearly distressed that no blame was found and Mrs Allen's daughter Laura Dawkins questioned: "How could it have been an accident with all her injuries?"

Mrs Allen was killed in a lift at Lambourne Court on Woodford Green's Orchard Estate.

Shockingly, the court heard that other flats on the estate might have had the same problem with the lifts.

Coroner Elizabeth Stearns said parts on some of the estate's lifts "were coming to the end of their useful life", something which was confirmed by Dr Anthony Wray, a control systems specialist who works for the Health and Safety Executive and examined the lift.

At the start of the inquest the court heard from Robert Russell, Mrs Allen's former partner and flatmate.

He described how he watched Mrs Allen, 50, get into the lift and as he was about to step in, the lift gradually went up and then accelerated.

The incident happened at about midnight on August 8 last year after Mr Russell and Mrs Allen had visited Miss Dawkins.

Miss Dawkins, 27, said she became aware something was wrong because she said goodbye to her mother and Mr Russell and soon after her dog started barking.

When she went into the corridor of the flats she saw her mother stuck between the lift floor and ceiling with part of her head and her arms hanging out.

Pathologist Peter Tanner, who carried out the post-mortem examination, said Mrs Allen would have died instantly.

He gave the cause of death as multiple injuries as Mrs Allen suffered "absolutely massive facial injuries", bruising to her chest, a fracture of the chest wall and breast bone and bruises to both lungs.

Terry Moysey, a lift engineer with 40 years experience, worked for Apollo Lift Services, the firm contracted to maintain the lifts.

Mr Moysey inspected the lift once a month and had carried out routine maintenance on July 14, 2009, less than a month before the tragedy.

He said: "Routine maintenance involves checking the lift motor, the gear box, the gear box oil and the brakes."

The checks are mainly visual and also involve shutting the lift down to residents and the engineer runs it to check whether there are any smells or apparent faults.

He stressed that when he checked the lift weeks before the accident there were no issues for him to report and fix.

The lifts were also subject to a further check once every six months from an engineer from insurance firm Zurich.

The company, which independently oversees the work of lift engineering firms, inspected the lift on April 22, 2009, and the only fault reported was that the flooring needed replacing as it had become broken.

The key evidence came from Mr Wray who took the workings of the lift to pieces as part of his investigation.

He said the fault with the lift was electrical parts that release the brake were about 10-years-old and had become eroded.

This meant the brakes were not releasing and were applied continuously causing the brake pads to wear down.

When Mrs Allen, who lived at Apollo Court, Leytonstone, stepped into the lift the brake pads were worn down so much that the lift was not being held securely in place.

As she stepped in a counter weight kicked in causing the lift to shoot up.

When asked why the faults had not been spotted, Mr Wray said because the electrical components had most likely eroded within a matter of days before the accident and after the last inspection.

He said: "The first thing I saw when I went into the motor room was that the motor for the lift was covered in brake dust.

"The motor for the other lift in the block was pristine in comparison."

The dust was where the brake pads had been wearing away.

Dr Stearns and the jury accepted that lift inspections would not have discovered the fault with the electrical components as they are encased in a sealed unit which an engineer would not be able to open as part of routine maintenance.

Anne Okoisor, of the Health and Safety Executive, said sensors were installed after the accident to detect when a lift was running with the brakes still applied.

She also agreed the HSE would contact manufacturers of the electrical components to ask for a warning to be put on the parts advising of the life span of the part, although she conceded this was not currently the practice as it all depended on how often a lift was used.

After hearing statements and from witnesses in court, the jury recorded a verdict of accidental death.

Outside court, Geoffrey Dawkins, Mrs Allen's father said his family were after a different verdict.

The 79-year-old of South Woodford, said: "We don't think it was an accident and because that's what they've said it means Laura won't be able to bring a case against anyone.

"There were lots of complaints about the lifts and Christine didn't deserve this.

"I hope she didn't die for nothing.

"As a family, we keep together and we will support each other, that's what we're all about."