

DAYTONA BEACH - Medical specialists around the country kept a close eye on this area after the suspended Volusia County medical examiner charged that patients in hospice care were being drugged to death, a nationally known pain-management specialist said Friday.

Dr. Laurel Herbst said doctors were alarmed by the investigation of Dr. **Ronald Reeves**, who earlier this year said he had uncovered more than a dozen "suspicious" deaths, including four he labeled as homicides.

Reeves said 19 Hospice of Volusia-Flagler or Halifax Medical Center patients died from overdoses of morphine at the hands of their health-care workers.

But a panel of medical experts put together by the state Medical Examiner's Commission dismissed his findings, saying they were based on a misunderstanding of the use of morphine to control pain.

"It was known all over the country what was happening in Daytona Beach," Herbst said. "It was pretty much the general consensus that it was an off-base issue."

Herbst visited the Kerman Regional Oncology Center in Daytona Beach this week to address the aftermath of **Reeves'** investigation and how it affected the local medical community.

She spent much of Wednesday and Thursday assuring local medical professionals that morphine and other pain relievers can be administered without fear.

On Friday, she was scheduled to speak with at least four families whose loved ones' deaths were included in **Reeves'** investigation. Relatives of Mabel Connor, whose March 23 death was one of four that **Reeves** called a homicide, were the only ones to show up.

Herbst said Florida doctors fearful of prescribing morphine to control a patient's pain have the law on their side.

A 1997 law allows doctors to administer opiates, such as morphine, to patients with severe pain without fear of prosecution.

Before the law was passed, doctors giving the drugs for pain relief could be prosecuted if patients later died with high levels of the painkillers in their bloodstreams.

"If everyone had known about the intractable-pain law, then this whole situation would have been avoided," Herbst said, adding that doctors wouldn't have been questioned on the amount of morphine found in their patients after death because the law protects doctors' judgment.

Now that the review of **Reeves'** investigation is complete, Herbst said it's up to the medical community to calm any lingering fears the public has. **Reeves'** investigation created a "false hysteria" over the use of morphine to control pain, she said.

Over the years, treating pain with large doses of opiates, including morphine, has become more acceptable to patients and doctors.

"It isn't morphine that's the problem," she said. "It's what we thought of pain in the old days."