

Death in custody to be probed

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ONE of 43 people arrested last week in Victoria's biggest ever drug bust has died in custody.

Dung Hoang Le, 48, of Springvale, was pronounced dead on Saturday after being taken to a secure prison ward at St Vincent's Hospital.

But lawyers who represented Le last week learnt of his death only yesterday when prison authorities returned a faxed letter inquiring about his whereabouts with the word "deceased" added in handwriting.

Le, who had asthma and did not speak English, was married with two boys aged two and a baby. He also had an adult daughter, Thuong Nguyen, from a previous relationship.

Ms Nguyen yesterday told *The Age* she was informed by authorities that her "loving and attentive" father was found unconscious and not breathing in a toilet at the Melbourne Assessment Prison.

Ms Nguyen said she could not accept he died from an asthma attack and that he had been "happy" the day before his arrest, which she had learnt about from media reports.

She and her father, who did not live together, had been at Melbourne Airport to farewell a relative to Vietnam for a family memorial.

Prison authorities arranged for police to tell Le's family that he was in hospital, she said.

Ms Nguyen told *The Age* she was now preparing to return with his body to Vietnam for burial.

A Melbourne court heard earlier this week that Le was dead when a defence solicitor, George Balot, questioned a detective in a bail application for a co-accused.

Mr Balot later told *The Age* that Le's family were "devastated by this unexplained tragedy".

Le, believed to be an Australian citizen, was charged with offences that included trafficking and cultivating a commercial quantity of marijuana.

Police found marijuana growing in a number of houses in Footscray, Melton and Dandenong, and other premises in Springvale and Hampton Park.

Of those arrested, all but one are of Vietnamese origin and five are women. They all appeared last week in Melbourne Magistrates Court for filing hearings and have been remanded to appear in April.

Bill Grimshaw, of the law firm Matthew White and Associates, had yesterday asked the officer in charge of central records at Corrections Victoria for Le's present location.

A Corrections Victoria spokesman confirmed that a correctional services review and police would provide reports for the coroner about Le's death.

An operation codenamed Entity had run for 15 months and involved more than 600 police in raids on 65 properties before last week's arrests.

In last week's raids across Victoria, 43 suspects were arrested and thousands of marijuana plants with a potential wholesale value of more than \$30 million had been seized.

As the investigation proceeds, police expect to seize property with an estimated value of about \$18 million under crime forfeiture laws.

Since the operation began, police have raided 120 crop houses linked to five inter-related Vietnamese syndicates.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/death-in-custody-to-be-probed-20101130-18fig.html>