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Man arrested in 6-year-old hotel slaying

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DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) -- A former maintenance chief at a suburban hotel made an initial court appearance Friday in the slaying more than six years ago of a hotel guest, and police said he has not been ruled out as a suspect in two other killings in the area.

Donald Piper, 38, was being held in the Polk County Jail under \$500,000 cash bond on a first-degree murder charge in the 1993 slaying of Patricia Lange.

Lange's body was found Aug. 16, 1993, in her room at the West Des Moines Holiday Inn, where she'd been staying for about 10 days after moving to the Des Moines area from Denver. She had been strangled.

West Des Moines police said new technology developed since Lange's death helped implicate Piper, who surrendered to police Thursday.

Lt. Scott Wiegert confirmed DNA tests were done, but said ``that's only one of many scientific tests we've done."

Police spent hundreds of hours on the case, conducting numerous interviews. They have videotapes and photographs of the hotel room.

``In any situation like that, you're looking at people who were there, employees, everything," Wiegert said.

A tip to the Crime Stoppers telephone hotline led them to focus on Piper.

``In December 1993, we received a Crime Stoppers call reference Donald Piper," Wiegert said. ``That was a start. That wasn't the only factor."

Piper had left his job at the hotel on June 22, 1993, about two months before Lange was strangled. He said he quit for a better job as a service technician at Accurate Mechanical.

Piper was fired by Accurate Mechanical on Oct. 8, 1999. A company letter said constant surveillance by police interfered with operations.

Piper had been under surveillance for the past six months, police said.

In an interview last week with the Des Moines Sunday Register, Piper, who is married and has two grown children, accused police of harassing him and causing him to lose his job.

``The only thing I can do is to look you in the eyes and look God in the eyes and say I could not murder anything," Piper said. ``I would not hurt any human being."

Piper ``has not been ruled out" as a suspect in two other unsolved killings in Des Moines area motels, one in September 1997 and one in January 1998, Wiegert said.

``We have a task force now that will continue to investigate the Lange homicide," Wiegert said. ``We also are investigating the possible involvement of Donald Piper in other unsolved homicides in the Des Moines area."

Zurijeta Sakanovic, 21, a maid, was found stabbed and strangled Sept. 4, 1997, at the Budgetel Inn in Clive.

Mariana Redrovan, 15, a maid, was found stabbed at Best Western Walnut Creek in West Des Moines on Jan. 16, 1998.