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A MEDICAL SPECULATION

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Ruby's Emotions--Did They Speed Up Cancer?

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The possibility that growth of the cancer which killed Jack Ruby may have been enhanced by his emotional state is being considered seriously by some physicians.

The speculation hangs on the theory, still unproved, that a relationship exists between the rapid growth of cancer and intense but unresolved feelings.

It is possible, some doctors believe, that changes in body chemistry which are known to accompany intense psychological stress create under certain circumstances a body environment which is favorable to the growth of cancer.

There are dozens of reports in the medical literature purporting to show that psychological influences are either a factor in causing cancer, or that the disease is more apt to occur in persons with certain personalities.

No Definite Answer Yet

"There is no definitive answer as yet but there definitely is some reason to suspect that intense stress or perhaps a deep sense of personal failure may influence cancer growth," Dr. Charles W. Wahl, chief of the division of psychosomatic medicine at UCLA, said in an interview.

"This is one of the blank spots on the medical canvas but certainly a germane and appropriate hypothesis."

Dr. Sol Baker, past-president of the California division of the American Cancer Society and a member of the national board of ACS, said there is no evidence to support the notion Ruby's cancer may have been caused by stress but that emotions conceivably could have been a factor in promoting its growth.

"There are enough coincidences to make some doctors feel there may be a relationship. Unfortunately, those coincidences are not scientific evidence. But because the coincidences are often so striking, the subject needs investigation," Dr. Baker said. The latter comment was directed at the whole subject of cancer and emotions not at the Jack Ruby case.

Some of the strongest evidence relates emotions with certain kinds of cancer which are known to be influenced by hormones. Examples

are breast, prostate and ovarian cancer.

Psychological stress—such as despair, frustration or anxiety—produces marked changes in the amounts of hormones released by the adrenal glands. This is the reason these glands are also known as the "stress" glands.

The hormones released by the adrenals get into the blood stream and have important effects on many parts of the body, but especially the reproductive organs and breasts.

While the precise mechanism is not known, it is theorized that the changes in biochemistry may in subtle ways affect the division of cells in such a way as to promote growth in cancer cells which may be present.

None of the researchers who have concluded that emotions influence cancer growth are trying to say that emotions are the whole story. They realize that cancer is an extremely complex disease which involves some basic biological principles.

Can Have Effect

But they point out that emotions can be responsible for chemical and physical changes which in turn could have an effect on cell growth.

Some of the "coincidences" that must be reconciled before the possibility of a relationship can be tossed out are these:

1—There seems to be a slightly higher cancer death rate in hospitalized psychotic patients than in the normal population.

2—Depression and a sense of guilt are prominent in cancer patients. Whether this is entirely a reaction to knowing they have cancer is not known.

3—Some researchers report cancer patients are highly defensive, show a strong tendency to prevent the appearance of serenity in the presence of deeper inner distress, do not relieve anxiety through neurotic or normal channels, and are more inhibited than the average person.

Doctors say the influences, if any, that these and other psychological factors have on cancer will be difficult to determine because of the very large number of factors which influence not only the initiation but the growth of cancer.