

Supervisors Fire Coroner Noguchi

BY RAY ZEMAN
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Coroner Thomas T. Noguchi was fired Tuesday by the Board of Supervisors.

The dismissal, by a 5-0 vote, came on the heels of charges by L. S. Hollinger, county chief administrative officer, that Noguchi has taken drugs in excessive quantities and has exhibited symptoms indicating need for psychiatric care.

"The charges are distorted, ridiculous and untrue," said the coroner's attorney, Godfrey Isaac.

"I'm prepared to carry this to the Supreme Court, if necessary."

Isaac said he will appeal today or Thursday to the County Civil Service Commission, which is required by law to hold a public hearing.

Should the three-member commission refuse to reinstate Noguchi in his \$31,104-a-year position, the only appeal is to the courts.

Hollinger made his lengthy char-

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ges Friday in a report to the supervisors and in a letter to Noguchi.

A motion by Supervisor Burton W. Chace supported Hollinger's recommendation for permanent dismissal and his statement of reasons. After a 20-minute executive session, the motion was approved.

Hollinger believes this is the first time a county department head has been ousted since 1936, when a purchasing agent left under clouded circumstances.

"We cannot take the charges leveled against Noguchi too lightly," Chace said.

"They are serious and have shaken public confidence in the office of the county chief medical examiner-coroner."

Hearing Promised

Chace said Noguchi will receive "a full and fair public hearing" before the commission.

"The matter must be

resolved to the full satisfaction of the public," the supervisor emphasized. "The charges should either be sustained or disproved."

The Hollinger report accused the Japanese-born coroner of threatening to kill Hollinger of desiring to perform autopsies on him and other county officials and of praying for airplane and helicopter disasters that might bring glory to his office.

While not questioning the 42-year-old physician's qualifications as a forensic pathologist, Hollinger classified his performance as a department head as so unsatisfactory that "discharge is the only appropriate action."

Noguchi filed notice of resignation Feb. 25 after Hollinger first had made brief charges that the coroner had behaved erratically and threatened subordinates with injury.

However, the coroner withdrew the resignation before the supervisors could act on it.

Refused Transfer

They then suspended him March 4, pending further investigation, and appointed as acting coroner Dr. Russell Henry, 58, chief of the coroner's forensic medicine division.

Noguchi refused to accept a position as chief pathologist at the county's Rancho Los Amigos Hospital, Downey, at no reduction in pay.

His wife, Mrs. Hisako Noguchi, charged he was the victim of racial discrimination, and members of the Japanese colony support him in his battle against either suspension or dismissal.

"Dr. Noguchi denies the charges against him generally and specifically."



Dr. Thomas Noguchi
Times photo

Isaac told the supervisors.

"His reputation is at stake. His very life will be affected by whatever this honorable board will do."

In keeping with principles of jurisprudence and "the American sense of fair play," Isaac vowed to prove (1) the charges are untrue, (2) Noguchi has well and faithfully performed the duties of his office and (3) should be retained.

Appointment Contested

Supervisors Chace and Warren M. Dorn opposed Dr. Noguchi when he was appointed coroner on Dec. 19, 1967, while Supervisors Frank G. Bonelli and Kenneth Hahn backed him.

Supervisor Ernest E. Debs at that time cast the swing vote in favor but emphasized that the coroner would have to "patch up" his relations with the USC and UCLA medical schools.

The universities, with support of Dr. Lewis P. Bullock, chairman of the County Medical Assn.'s coroner committee, believed Noguchi, then 40, was too young and inexperienced.

In voting Tuesday to fire Noguchi, Dorn said, "This is the worst handling I've seen in this county. Before

a person is suspended ne ought to have a chance to answer."

Dorn ultimately supported Chace's dismissal motion but expressed hope that "every possible avenue be pursued."

Hahn called Hollinger's charges the most serious ever placed against any county employe, let alone a department head.

He called the entire situation regrettable but said the board had no alternative but to vote dismissal.

He and Dorn said that at some future time Dr. Noguchi might qualify for a position in some other unit of a county government.

Hahn pointed ~~out~~ that the coroner, in office a little more than a year, has been under tremendous pressure.

His workload has included autopsies in the Sen. Robert F. Kennedy assassination, two helicopter crashes and two airliner crashes into the ocean.

Bonelli said it would be better for Noguchi to be heard by the Civil Service Commission than by the supervisors, who voted to fire him.

Debs denied that the dismissal vote was tainted by racial prejudice.

"The chief administrative officer (Hollinger) is bringing these charges with all the honesty and

integrity any man can bring," Debs said. "The department has been in a turmoil for some time."

But Isaac told the supervisors:

"Dr. Noguchi is not insane. He is not mentally ill. He appears totally sound.

"The County of Los Angeles did not consider him ill when it offered him a position two weeks ago as chief pathologist at

Rancho Los Amigos."

Isaac said he has demanded full details of all of Hollinger's charges, and if he does not receive complete documentation he will petition a court.

Through his attorney, Noguchi later issued this statement:

"From the moment I was appointed coroner I have devoted the full measure of my energy and efforts to improving the office, increasing its capacity and insuring that the public receives the best possible service.

"I have worked extra hours and even subsidized the county by taking my own equipment and library to the laboratory.

"It is with a deep feeling of confidence that I invite a review of my record, and it is my belief that the citizens of this county will support me when they have all the facts."