

Dr. Noguchi to Ask Hearing on Reinstatement

Ousted Coroner Will Be Central Figure in the 'Mystery of L.A. Morgue'

BY RAY ZEMAN
Times County Bureau Chief

From the days when Edgar Allan Poe wrote "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" to the television era of prosecutors like Perry Mason and sleuths like Sgt. Joe Friday, the coroner has often played a leading role in determining "who done it."

Today Dr. Thomas T. Noguchi, fired by the Board of Supervisors last Tuesday from his post as coroner, is playing the central role himself in a new mystery.

The public is wondering whether L. S. Hollinger, county chief administrative officer, was right in accusing the coroner of taking drugs in excessive quantities and exhibiting symptoms indicating need for psychiatric care.

At noon today Noguchi's attorney, Godfrey Isaac, will demand a Civil Service Commission hearing which he believes will exonerate the coroner and reinstate him in his \$31,104-a-year position.

Isaac probably will insist on six or eight weeks' time to prepare for the hearing, which may develop into a legal three-ring circus.

In a report to the Board of Supervisors and in a supplementary letter transmitted by the supervisors to Noguchi, Hollinger said Noguchi had threatened to kill him (Hollinger).

Letter Makes Accusation

The letter also accused the coroner of expressing a desire to perform autopsies on Hollinger, County Personnel Director Gordon T. Nesvig and Harry L. Hufford, budget division chief.

Something like a cause celebre may develop if any controversy arises over Noguchi's supervision of

the autopsy after the assassination of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy.

This is just one of scores of famous autopsies which Los Angeles County's morgue has handled over the years to determine the circumstances and cause of all violent, sudden or unusual deaths.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, Erle Stanley Gardner and S. S. Van Dine would find this morgue a storehouse of raw material for best-selling fiction.

Noguchi's predecessors have performed autopsies on film stars like Marilyn Monroe, Thelma Todd and Carole Landis almost as routine chores.

The Feb. 1, 1922, slaying of William Desmond Taylor, motion picture director, still ranks as one of America's 10 most famous unsolved murder mysteries. Basic evidence, if a suspect is ever apprehended, will come from the Los Angeles morgue.

Cases like these have always focused public attention on the coroner.

Coroner Normally Well-Known

Unlike the county chief administrative officer, who usually remains out of the spotlight, the coroner normally is as well-known as the chief of police.

Whether he handles an inquest for almost 500 deaths, as Coroner Frank A. Nance did after the St. Francis Dam disaster of March 12, 1928, or supervises only a single obscure case, the coroner always is open to criticism.

Foes of Noguchi's predecessor, Dr. Theodore Curphey, were whispering, "How can we get rid of him?"

And Noguchi underwent criticism from the USC and UCLA medical schools before he even took over Curphey's post on Dec. 19, 1967.

The Civil Service Commission hearing on Noguchi's dismissal, which may easily run two weeks or more, will point up a terrific clash in personalities.

On the one side will be the tall, strong, golf-playing, 59-year-old Hollinger, an Indiana-born executive

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who began work in the county auditor's office in 1925.

He started as a messenger at \$90 a month, just two months after graduation from Inglewood High School at the age of 16. After almost 44 years with the county, he now earns \$38,520 a year and supervises more than 50 county

departments.

On the other side is the shorter, 42-year-old Noguchi, Japanese-born, Japanese and American-educated. He is now an American citizen.

In comparison with Hollinger, he appears almost frail.

He neither drinks nor smokes. He is an expert photographer and likes to go skin diving on the shoreline.

Hollinger speaks swiftly and curtly in precise English.

Noguchi speaks English slowly, with a slight accent.

Attorneys Take Part

In press, radio and television appearances, his attorneys often have shouldered much of the load in answering questions for him, both to speed the pace and to add emphasis to his denials of all of Hollinger's charges.

His wife, Hisako, 46, insists Noguchi is the victim of racial prejudice.

Born in San Pedro, she earned a doctorate in biochemistry at the University of Tokyo and has done much work at UCLA.

She now teaches immunology-serology and electron microscopy at Cal State L.A.

She met Noguchi in 1953 when he was a pleurisy patient at Barlow Sanatorium, where she then worked.

Sponsor Japanese Student

They have no children but are sponsoring a 20-year-old student from Japan at Los Angeles City College.

She is Miss Masako Kumamoto. She has been living at the Noguchi home since September, 1967.

"We consider her a part of the family and Dr. Noguchi often introduces her as our daughter," Mrs. Noguchi said.

Met on Lecture Tour

He met her in Japan when he was on a lecture tour and was introduced to her and her family by a colleague in forensic medicine.

Noguchi scoffs at Hol-

Hollinger's drug accusations.

"I have had extensive dental work and have been suffering with an infection of the tongue since 1966," he explained.

"I took vitamins and a pain-killer — Darvon — three or four times a day," Noguchi continued. "It was necessary. The pain was quite excruciating."

Darvon is an analgesic used to relieve pain. It contains propoxyphene, caffeine, hydrochloride and aspirin, the coroner's office reports. It can be obtained only by prescription but is not a narcotic.

Asked if Hollinger's accusations that he threatened employes in his department were true, Noguchi said "No, no."

"Do you yell at them?" he was asked in reference to a further charge.

"If work is not done, I do yell," Noguchi replied.

Becomes Moody

Later he added, "When you have this excruciating pain, you become moody. Maybe that's why I yell."

Noguchi has been the center of controversy ever since his appointment as the county's chief medical examiner-coroner was first suggested.

After Curphey retired on Oct. 30, 1967, the Los Angeles County Employes Assn. charged that the County Medical Assn.'s medical examiner committee headed by Dr. Lewis T. Bullock was trying to play a "kingmaker" role in appointing a new coroner.

Bullock called this accusation "a lie."

Curphey had been recruited for the job by members of the medical profession and had served as a professor of forensic pathology on the staffs of four medical schools.

Two of the schools, USC and UCLA, said Noguchi was unacceptable to them as Curphey's successor.

Noguchi was one of three pathologists certified for the position by a special civil service oral examining board.

The other two, from out of state, reportedly planned to withdraw their names from the list when they were informed that they, too, were unacceptable to the USC and UCLA medical schools and would not be offered part-time professorships.

The professorships initially were offered to supplement the county salary, then \$27,720 a year, which was considered insuffi-

cient to attract top-talent pathologists.

Bullock pointed out that the coroner's office controls all bodies in which death occurs under medical-legal circumstances and is the only place in the county to train medical examiners.

While admitting Noguchi was a competent man, Bullock said, "He doesn't have the teaching or administrative experience or the maturity to handle the job. It would be just too much for him."

County supervisors deadlocked 2 to 2 over appointing Noguchi on Nov. 28, 1967.

Supervisors Kenneth Hahn and Frank G. Bonelli favored him but Supervisors Burton W. Chace and Warren M. Dorn supported the medical schools. Supervisor Ernest E. Debs was absent.

The schools then invited three nationally recognized pathologists to come to Los Angeles to discuss the position.

However, the attempts by medical educators to bypass a civil service list and handpick a new coroner were stymied when County Counsel John D. Maharg informed the supervisors that Dr. Joseph B. Campbell of Philadelphia was not withdrawing as one of the three eligible candidates.

This, Maharg said, made it mandatory for the board

to select one of three doctors certified by the Civil Service Commission.

Campbell refused a request by Bullock to withdraw his name. He had scored highest in the examination; Noguchi ranked second. Dr. Robert Hausman of San Antonio, who

placed third, was not seriously considered.

Finally, on Dec. 19, 1967, Debs cast the tie-breaking vote to appoint Noguchi, 3 to 2. Debs said he was willing to give Noguchi a six-month chance to win the support of the USC and UCLA medical schools.

Nothing went serenely.

Dr. George Lundberg, a toxicologist at the USC school of medicine, subsequently estimated that "perhaps one-half of all the murders committed in Los Angeles are being missed because of deficiencies in the coroner's office."

Noguchi pleaded for budget and staff expansions.

On call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, he said he took most of his personal library to the coroner's office to supplement its meager collection of books and journals.

He purchased more books, bought his own dictating machine and brought two of his own microscopes to the office.

"It is not an exaggeration to say that my husband has poured back a third to a half or more of his county salary into expenditures directly or indirectly related to his

work at the coroner's office," Mrs. Noguchi said.

But Hollinger's investigators recommended 24 major changes in the department which investigates 13,000 deaths annually.

Condemning "poor housekeeping," they reported case files strewn

randomly atop desks, case reports poorly filed and stored, an improper work flow, lack of clear, well-written office procedures for personnel and "shouting between supervisors and those supervised."

Meanwhile, some of No-
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NOGUCHI

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guchi's employes were complaining to Hollinger.

They said he ordered the practice of placing eight tissue samples on one culture plate discontinued and insisted on only one sample on each plate.

When asked why, Hollinger said in his charges, Noguchi replied, "The more plates the better."

This merely inflated the work load, Hollinger maintained.

The top county executive further charged that Noguchi hoped to take over the Health Department and public administrator's office and the office of the Orange County coroner.

In a "forensic Mafia" plan, he hoped to become responsible for "everything west of the Mississippi" while an Eastern pathologist of his acquaintance would "take over everything east of the Mississippi." Hollinger's letter asserted.

Further accusations that Noguchi prayed for major disasters because of the glory they would bring to the coroner's office have been denied by the fired coroner and his attorney—along with the mental and other accusations.

Hearings Public

The hearing, perhaps in May, will be public.

Testimony will be under oath, recorded both by a stenographer and tape.

If the commission fails to reinstate Noguchi in his position, Isaac has vowed to carry an appeal "to the

Supreme Court, if necessary."

Contending Noguchi is the victim of a power struggle among medical schools and societies, Isaac has called Hollinger's charges distortions, misinterpretations of stress situations and vague.

He has no intention of making any "deal" like Noguchi's resignation Feb. 25 to accept a position as chief pathologist at the county's Rancho Los Amigos Hospital in Downey at no reduction in pay.

Noguchi withdrew this resignation March 4 before the supervisors could act on it. He said friends had advised him to fight for his post as chief medical examiner-coroner.

The firing of Noguchi last Tuesday was the first dismissal of a county department head in 33 years.

May Assist Noguchi

Dr. William G. Eckert of St. Francis Hospital, Wichita, Kan., may come to the Civil Service Commission hearing to assist Noguchi, just as he did in the Sen. Kennedy autopsy.

Eckert, former chairman of the pathology section of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, edits a publication of the International Reference Organization in Forensic Medicine.

Noguchi is coeditor of this magazine.

Eckert condemned what he called the "affaire Noguchi" as a clandestine investigation by Hollinger to collect dirt.

Dr. Francisco Bravo, for whom Noguchi once worked two years in a clinic and who also has worked with him as an associate pathologist in a hospital, described the ousted coroner as a "cultured, polite, courteous, friendly gentleman."

Noguchi, a naturalized citizen of the United States, was graduated from Nippon Medical School in 1951 and served his internship at Tokyo Imperial Hospital in Japan and Orange County General Hospital.

Other Training

His training and work as

an associate clinical professor has moved through Loma Linda University School of Medicine, Barlow Sanatorium and USC school of medicine.

The burden of proof of the charges in the hearing is on the county.

Civil Service Commission Rule 5.08 states:

"The hearing shall be formal, but need not be conducted according to technical rules relating to evidence and witnesses. Any relevant evidence shall be admitted . . .

"Hearsay evidence may be admitted for any purpose but shall not be sufficient in itself to support a finding unless it would be admissible over objection in civil actions."

It all sounds like Perry Mason.