

An interview with the L.A. County Coroner

# Noguchi talks about smog, speed,

PAUL EBERLE

During his brief term as Los Angeles County Coroner, Dr. Tom Noguchi has made a lot of headlines, some very sensational ones, and some that I'm sure he would have preferred to forego. His testimony in the Bobby Kennedy murder trial was the first to capture the credibility of the State's case against Sirhan Sirhan (but not the last). Shortly thereafter, the County's chief administrative officer moved to oust Dr. Noguchi from his job. Charges of insanity, drug addiction and even more bizarre accusations were made. Noguchi fought back, demanding a hearing.

The County Supervisors tried to hold the hearing behind locked doors, barring cameras and sound equipment, but the media screamed so loudly that the county was forced to hold open public hearings. I was there. Even conservative establishment newsmen shook their heads in disbelief and indignation at the County's total lack of any substantial case against Noguchi. He was reinstated.

Why did they try to oust him? Was it the Kennedy thing? Was it racism? Was it simply because he didn't belong to the "country club" that exercises great power and control over the local medical profession? Was it because he made no secret of the fact that he wanted to change the procedures in coroner's inquests, so that policemen would not always be automatically whitewashed after shooting a civilian?

Probably all of the above.

He has been described by medical men from all over the world as one of the finest pathologists. He is a gentle, quiet man. He is also a man of considerable courage and integrity.

—P.E.

*The following interview between Dr. Noguchi and the Free Press was conducted in late August at the coroner's office.*

F.P.: Your job involves determining the cause of death. Do you see air pollution as the cause of death in many cases?

Noguchi: Yes. I think air pollution in the Los Angeles area is a definite threat to health.

A death certificate is not sign-

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## weed, RFK, inquests

ed as a death by air pollution alone. We believe that often, when a person dies, particularly an elderly person who has had an asthmatic attack previously, or perhaps has had a history of heart attacks, such a person often dies from a combination of smog and existing disease. For this reason, we feel that when a smog continues it becomes not only a health hazard but what I consider to be definitely a life-threatening condition.

F.P.: What does smog consist of? What is it in smog that kills?

Noguchi: It consists of a number of chemicals and fumes. At this time, hydrocarbons, carbon monoxide, nitrogens, oxide, sulphur fumes, and a number of acids and dusts. I believe, from my study of lungs, and nasal passages and the airway to the lungs, that a number of irritants, continually exposed to the lining of the airway to the lungs causes a swelling and mucus production, and causes obstruction of the airways — that is — choking conditions.

F.P.: You were quoted in the press last summer as having said that a young person, on whom you performed an autopsy, had not lived in Los Angeles for more than a couple of weeks. I believe you said that this could be determined by the color of the person's lungs.

Noguchi: Yes, we did make that statement, inadvertently. We expressed that opinion, based on what is rather common knowledge in the

medical profession that in the case of people living in a metropolitan area, exposed to air pollution, and carbon particles, we can tell from the color, black carbons deposited on the surface of the lungs, and lymph nodes—and sometimes you find it in the liver and spleen, in severe cases. Now, this is not usually observed in babies. Babies' lungs are pink. Our lungs, particularly as we get into the thirties, we begin

to pick up black speckles, and under microscopic examination it is found to be carbon particles. As the person gets older—if he continues to live in an urban environment—the intensity of the blackening of the lungs increases. Referring to the case we are discussing, the person's lungs were unusually clean.

*F.P.: This was the body found on Mulholland Drive last summer?*

Noguchi: Yes. For the purpose of assisting the police investigation and identification we offered the opinion that the person was most likely not from the Los Angeles area but from an area where there was less air pollution.

*F.P.: Would you say, as a doctor, that air pollution is shortening our lives, if we live in LA or a large city?*

Noguchi: Yes. I have held the opinion in the past that heavy smog might not have harmful effects, but as we've experienced smog over 20 years, the statistics indicate, and medical opinion—including mine—is definitely that it threatens life and is shortening life.

And it is my opinion that air pollution is an urgent problem that must be solved as soon as possible. Otherwise we will face a very strange chemical environment that we are not adapted to survive in.

*F.P.: What percent of the smog comes from cars and trucks?*

Noguchi: Experts believe that most of it comes from motor vehicles.

*F.P.: How much does it shorten a person's life?*

Noguchi: I have made observations as a coroner, and there are the opinions of colleagues. I do not wish to overly alarm the public. But it has such a tremendous effect on the respiratory system that, particularly in the case of a person who is suffering from other conditions, it could shorten life by years. Years.

*F.P.: And unless something is done, it will continue to get worse.*

Noguchi: Well, all of us who have been living in Los Angeles have been exposed to a number of years of air pollution problems. The longer we are exposed, the more harmful and threatening to our lives it

will be.

*F.P.: What can we do about it?*

Noguchi: We've got to get clean air and do something about auto exhaust. We must form not only a medical panel but we should get together with the community to coordinate on smog problems. People have been trying to do it, but reluctant parties exist. We have not been effective. There is great resistance from certain quarters.

*F.P.: Every time someone in the State Legislature tries to get a new law that will lower air pollution, the oil and automobile industry lobbyists move in quickly to squash it.*

Noguchi: I believe people have a right to serve their own interests, but when it comes to public health, they should not be so selfish and money-grabbing. I think they should get some constructive concern for mankind. Because all of us will be wiped out by the strange chemical environment that results from pollution of the environment. We are completely surrounded with strange chemicals.

*F.P.: What about DDT?*

Noguchi: Our department has not conducted a special study, but DDT, according to the scientific data that we have to rely on, DDT and other insecticides are slowly affecting human cells, and may be a triggering effect towards the formation of the malignancy that is cancer.

*F.P.: What other harmful effects does smog have besides death?*

Noguchi: A number of problems ... irritation of eyes, irritation of sinuses, sinus pain, sore throat, asphyxiation sensation, burning of the inside of the trachea, which is the airway or windpipe ... chronic coughing, sometimes causing chest pains ... muscle aches ... nausea and loss of appetite ... And then, some patients complain of a chronic headache, and inability to concentrate on work.

*F.P.: It affects the functioning of the brain?*

Noguchi: It affects judgment because smog contains particles that affect the normal functioning of the brain, and other normal, daily functions. It not only can cause headache and nausea and vomiting; it also can affect equilibrium, so that the incidence of accidents may be increased.

*F.P.: Many doctors are saying that lack of exercise is a leading cause of arteriosclerosis, which is a leading cause of so many relatively young people dying in this country. Would physical conditioning with vigorous exercise be a way to combat the harmful effects of smog?*

Noguchi: When there is heavy smog

with high ozone content and nitrous oxides are high, and we are already at a dangerous level, strenuous exercise will be extremely harmful.

*F.P.: Then if you exercise, you should get out of LA?*

Noguchi: That's not always practical.

*F.P.: Do you have many cases of death from drug overdose?*

Noguchi: Yes, we have had a sud-

den increased incidence of drug overdose among youths. In 1965 we had only fifty hard narcotic deaths, but in 1967 we had over 300 hard narcotic deaths. In 1965 these cases were concentrated in the downtown area and a few other areas. Now, to our surprise, they are not located in one geographic area but throughout Los Angeles County.

*F.P.: What drugs are the most common causes of death?*

Noguchi: Among youth, heroin is the most common cause of death by overdose, but an almost equally high cause is barbiturates. Now, what happens is, they have taken one, and then another, and it reaches a point where the person loses judgment and reaches a point where he has taken more than he can handle. I call it "chemical Russian roulette." Sooner or later you're going to get it.

*F.P.: Have you ever had a case of death from marijuana?*

Noguchi: No. We have never had a case where we could say that marijuana was a cause.

*F.P.: Then there doesn't seem to be any evidence that it's dangerous?*

Noguchi: Well, it's my opinion that no matter how many you smoked, it wouldn't cause much ill effect, except possibly to the respiratory system. There is no case of death from marijuana ever recorded in this department.

*F.P.: Do you find it depressing to be a coroner—to work on dead people so much of the time?*

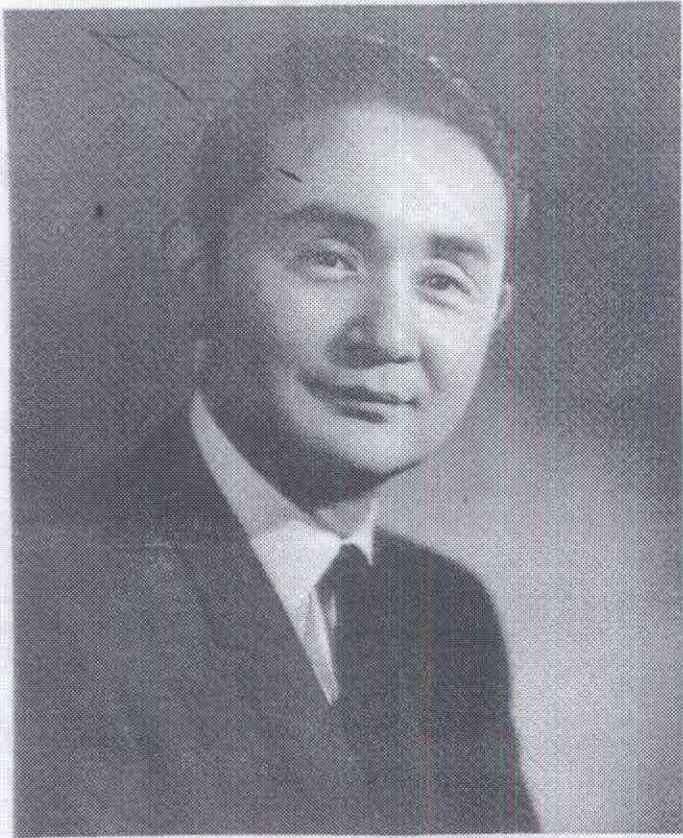
Noguchi: Well ... no ... First of all, I consider the principle that nothing is more important than

human life. So, when a death occurs, it is our duty to find out why. Thus, the victim becomes the physical evidence, left for us to interpret what might have happened. For this reason, I do not feel depressed at all.

There is a Latin proverb by Hi-

poocrates, which, translated, says: "Dead people would be delighted if the scientific data they provide is used to help the living." For this reason, I feel that the medical specialty called forensic medicine is not depressing, but challenging.

As a human being, I from time to time feel sad when we have to face the fact that there is a sudden increase in the number of murder victims. We have now over 700 murder victims in one year. Let me just give you some statistics. In 1964, I believe we had 290 cases. In 1965 we had about 400 murder victims. But in 1968 it was 700. This included victims of massacres or multiple murders. Now, population has not increased proportionately. That means we are now entering into a violent era, and a strange chemical environment.



*F.P.: And you think the chemical environment may be a causative factor?*

Noguchi: I had not thought so before, but I do now. I think it's caused by an epidemic of violent thinking caused by chemicals. Depressing chemicals and hallucinogenic chemicals and the stimulants. Alcohol used to be the leading factor in violence and murders after heavy drinking. That doesn't seem to be the factor in the increase of murders.

*F.P.: What is, then?*

Noguchi: One is the infectious na-

ture of violent thinking. There is no longer the respect for human life. Two, the free use of chemicals, amphetamines for example.

*F.P.: At the time you did the autopsy on Sen. Robert Kennedy, the County Supervisors voted a resolution commending you on the outstanding job you had done, and some of the leading pathologists from all over the world, who were observers, also congratulated you publicly because they felt it was an outstanding job. Yet, only a few weeks later, they moved to oust you from your job. Why?*

Noguchi: I probably should not get into that. I don't think it would serve any constructive purpose.

*F.P.: Fine. We won't go into that then. There are a number of investigators and journalists who believe that Sirhan Sirhan definitely did not kill Sen. Kennedy. At the time of your autopsy you made a statement about the fatal wound and how close the muzzle of the gun was to Kennedy's skull when it was fired.*

Noguchi: Yes. I formed an opinion, based on the examination of the re-

marks, and also from test-firing the weapon, using a similar ammunition, I have testified that the muzzle distance was most likely less than three inches from the back of the right ear, and more likely ONE inch in distance.

*F.P.: And there were two other wounds on the right chest?*

Noguchi: There were two other wounds in the right axillar.

*F.P.: That's under the armpit?*

Noguchi: Yes.

*F.P.: And were they fired from the side or from behind?*

Noguchi: From a back-to-front direction.

*F.P.: How many wounds were there?*

Noguchi: A total of three gunshot wounds. There was an additional hole in the senator's suit where the bullet just went through the shoulder padding without damaging him.

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Eye witnesses have reported that Sirhan was at all times in FRONT of Sen. Kennedy and never closer than about four or five feet from him, and therefore could not possibly have fired the fatal shots.)

*F.P.: Did you find anything else in the autopsy that seems to contradict the findings of the court?*

Noguchi: I have very little to do with finding who has done it. My job is to tell what I found and what was the cause of death, and the scientific

evidence, and there are a number of contradictory statements that have been made. However, my area of knowledge ends almost entirely with the autopsy findings.

F.P.: At the time you testified at the Sirhan trial, it was felt by many people that you were cut off—that you were not allowed to give the full information on the cause of death. Was that true?

Noguchi: I don't really know. There was a detail that was not asked. Of course, I am not supposed to volunteer information. However, it appeared that the court and both defense counsel had accepted the report by my department and no detailed cross-examination was made. I don't know whether I should say "cut out" or just not asked.

F.P.: So there was no lengthy, vigorous cross-examination on your findings?

Noguchi: Not at all. Very brief. As I recall, there were only a few questions.

F.P.: I understand that you've changed the procedures of the coroner's inquest since you became coroner. Is that correct?

Noguchi: In a way, yes. I felt it was necessary to maintain the proper administration of justice. So I have worked with colleagues and other agencies to establish a more fair presentation of the facts, based on the principle: "There must be another side of the story."

F.P.: I understand you were not pleased with the verdict of the coroner's inquest in the Deadwiler case.

Noguchi: Well, I was a medical expert and testified on the medical facts. In 1966, I believe, the procedure that the department had followed was more-or-less a one-sided hearing. However, I think that if the coroner's hearing is to be useful for society, I think they should give the other party the right to speak. This was not well accepted in the beginning. Perhaps it can be accepted later on. But any time you bring change, you are bound to face resistance.

F.P.: How many jurors do you use in a coroner's inquest?

Noguchi: We have seven jurors.

F.P.: Where do you get them?

Noguchi: Jurors are selected from a Superior Court Jury Pool.

F.P.: What do they decide?

Noguchi: They decide whether there has been accidental death, justifiable homicide, or excusable homicide, or felonious homicide. This evaluation of criminality was a part of the function of the coroner's in-

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quest prior to November, 1969. The law has changed, so that the coroner's jury only deliberates the verdict of four possible causes: natural causes, accidental, suicide, or death at the hand of another.

When a gross negligence is involved in an accident and any practice, the jury instructions by Superior Court are that this could be classified as not an accident but at the hand of another or homicide.

F.P.: If a person dies in circumstances where his family feels there was gross negligence or incompetence on the part of his physician, or malpractice, what is the normal procedure? To whom do they direct their complaint?

Whom do they ask to investigate? The coroner?

Noguchi: Often, yes. And our department complies with such requests, so that case will be a coroner's case and a complete investigation will be conducted.

F.P.: I understand that in most cities, and in the past, in Los Angeles, coroners have been very reluctant to investigate cases of medical malpractice.

Noguchi: Most coroners would be reluctant to take such controversial cases. However, if you place in office a county official or coroner who dedicates his life to justice, I don't think he has a right to decide to stay away from a controversial case. I feel that by giving a proper evaluation, you often find that the doctor and the hospital have done the best they could. So it works both ways. The family may be suffering from grief so much that they become unreasonable. And there are hospitals and doctors who are negligent. When you do investigate you often find that there are areas of lack of communication between the physicians and the family.

And we have helped both. It is protection for the family to have a third party—a medical, investiga-

tive agency to look into it. And if a doctor or a hospital is too concerned about having an examination done by somebody else, and they retain their own pathologist to do an autopsy, there is always a certain doubt. I think there is value in having a third party that is impartial and disinterested.

F.P.: With the age of organ transplants growing now—they are transplanting hearts, kidneys, what else?

Noguchi: Skin ... bone ... eyes, liver, spleen, pancreas, and lungs ... Not all cases are successful yet, but they are learning to do it. And I think that the medical profes-

sion and the community is now facing an extreme shortage of viable organs. Our department is actively assisting the organ procurement program for those who need kidneys or a liver or heart.

F.P.: Do you have many requests?

Noguchi: Yes, the physicians have formed the organ transplant society. They work very closely with us. I would say there are eight to ten such requests that come in each month.

F.P.: Do you store organs for future transplants?

Noguchi: Yes. Especially kidneys. Kidney transplants have been very successful. Kidneys have been stored in the refrigerator for over 30 hours and have been flown all over the world for transplants.

F.P.: Can't they be stored longer than that?

Noguchi: Yes, with the use of a nutrient, and there is now a mechanical organ preserving instrument which is, I think, able to keep a kidney longer than three days.

F.P.: What about the liver?

Noguchi: The liver is a very sensitive organ. I think they can store it in a refrigerating container, but not as long as kidneys.

F.P.: Have liver transplants been successful?

Noguchi: Yes, there are surviving liver transplant patients, but they still have failures too.

F.P.: You seem to have received a great deal of hostility from the medical profession and from other quarters.

Noguchi: Well, sometimes a coroner has to investigate the police, or a doctor. A lot of people have wondered, "Who is this strange man from Japan who is our county coroner?" I'll tell you. I believe the coroner's office should serve all the people. Not just the few. I believe in justice. When I came here, I had only two suits and one pair of shoes. Last summer, during all the trouble, I figured, oh well, if I don't get my job back, I can always go back to the good old days. But I was pretty sure I'd get back. And my wife is really a fighter. When she gets mad, she starts writing letters.