

New Attention on Autopsies

The Findings Sometimes Turn Up Some Surprises on Causes of Deaths, Like Unsuspected Diseases

By LAWRENCE K. ALTMAN

Special to The New York Times

DOVER AIR FORCE BASE, Del., Dec. 4—The Federal Government's reluctant decision to perform autopsies on the bodies of the Rev. Jim Jones and six of his followers has focused attention on post-mortem examinations done for medical-legal reasons. Such autopsies often have produced surprising findings about causes of death. Sometimes, they have detected evidence of previously unsuspected disease that shed new light on an individual's behavior or on the events preceding his death. Sometimes, the evidence is at variance with theories of a death based on information from people with only limited knowledge of an individual or his death.

In recent years interest has been growing in forensic medicine, the specialty devoted to medical-legal autopsies. The reasons for this rising interest range from public attention to errors in the medical investigation of President Kennedy's assassination to the increasing litigation over insurance questions and other issues related to the cause of a person's death.

The Department of Justice, in a reversal of policy last week attributed largely to public pressure, has said it plans to do autopsies here on Mr. Jones, two close aides and four bodies randomly selected from those found in the People's Temple commune at Jonestown, Guyana. The seven autopsies, none of which had been done as of today, were ordered as much to settle legal questions that might arise in the future as to confirm that many deaths were due to cyanide poisoning.

An Aid to Explanation

Doctors have said that autopsies on Mr. Jones and his followers might yield evidence of brain tumors, syphilis or other conditions that could contribute to explanations of their bizarre behavior. An autopsy conducted on Charles Whitman, the gunman who killed 16 people and wounded 30 others from a tower at the University of Texas in 1966, founded a pecan-sized tumor in the brain.

The autopsy is a systematic external and internal examination of a body. Doctors make surgical incisions to look at vital organs with the naked eye and to obtain specimens used in chemical tests and microscopic examinations for foreign substances and anatomical abnormalities.

From information learned at the autopsy and from medical records, pathologists attempt to determine the cause of death. Sometimes, even with a massive amount of medical data, the cause is not clear.

Autopsies usually are carried out in

hospitals with permission from relatives of the dead person. But when a death is believed to be murder or suicide, or to have resulted from an accident with implications for public safety, medical examiners and coroners have the power to conduct an autopsies without such permission.

Federal law, however, does not author-

ize autopsies when suspicious deaths occur on Federal property in the United States — such as military bases, national parks and Indian reservations — or when Americans die abroad. In deaths that occur in the United States, Federal officials usually ask local medical examiners or coroners to do the autopsies.

The value of an autopsy is in determining what may not be obvious just by looking at a body, particularly if it is badly decomposed. Specialists in forensic pathology are trained to look for hidden bullet wounds, needle punctures, bruises, cuts, fractures and other evidence of physical trauma that might point to the cause or circumstances of a death.

In a death during a catastrophe, the cause of death may become evident only when autopsy findings are considered in the context of the disaster. As Dr. Michael M. Baden, the New York City Medical Examiner, noted: "To evaluate the death of any single person in a mass death situation, a qualified specialist must look at and judge the cause of death of all involved."

The value of autopsies is unappreciated by a large segment of society. Several officials of the State, Defense and Justice departments expressed surprise in recent days when informed that autopsies could be helpful in determining, for example, how many of the Jonestown bodies had bullet wounds and from which guns the shots were fired.

Plane Crash Investigations

One State Department spokesman expressed surprise when informed by a reporter that autopsies were done on some of the almost people who died in the crash of two jumbo jets in the Canary Islands in March 1977. Although these people died of obvious causes, autopsies on plane crash victims have helped engineers design safer aircraft.

Autopsies in disaster situations also can aid in identification of the dead. Although the team that investigated the Canary Islands crash was unable to identify about a third of the bodies, Dr. Lowell Levine of the New York City Medical Examiner's Office said that over the years the office has had almost complete success in identifying bodies, including those from plane crashes. As of tonight, 521 of the 911 bodies found in Jonestown had been identified.

An important problem in the field of forensic pathology is the small number of American doctors qualified in the specialty. But Dr. Cyril Wecht, the Medical Examiner for Allegheny County (Pittsburgh), and others maintain that a team of pathologists could have been assembled to do autopsies under field conditions in Jonestown.

"We have the specialists but not an organized system," Dr. Wecht said. "There's no question that if something like this happened in England, the Scandinavian countries or the Eastern European countries, the organization would have been much better because forensic medicine has been taught for 200 years and there is a better appreciation of its values" than in this country.

12-5-78