

Kopechne Autopsy Is Useless, Pathologists Say

By MARCIA HAYES
WILKES BARRE, Pa. (NANA) — Evidence of early pregnancy or internal injuries are the only conclusive findings that could be gleaned from an autopsy on the body of Mary Jo Kopechne, a leading pathologist has told the North American Newspaper Alliance.

Dr. Russell F. Fisher, medical examiner for the city of Baltimore, said it was "highly unlikely" the autopsy would yield conclusive proof of the cause of death of the former Kennedy secretary. And the time of death, he added, would be impossible to determine within a range of several hours.

"The only thing it could prove absolutely is that she

was or was not pregnant or that she did or did not suffer internal injuries in the accident," he said. A Massachusetts district attorney has asked that the body be exhumed and an autopsy performed.

THE PRETTY, blonde former secretary to the late Sen. Robert Kennedy was killed July 18, a week before her 29th birthday, when a car driven by Sen. Edward Kennedy plunged off a bridge on remote Chappaquiddick Island. Her body was buried four miles outside of Wilkes-Barre in St. Vincent's Cemetery.

Fisher's comments suggest the only real purpose of such an autopsy would be to lend credence to or dispel the

persistent rumor that Kennedy and Miss Kopechne had been having an affair that resulted in her pregnancy.

New York City Medical Examiner Dr. Milton Helpern dismissed the possibility that Miss Kopechne could have

been saved if the accident had been reported earlier. "When a car is upside down in the water with a window open, I think that's unlikely," he said, noting an air pocket would probably not have formed. "Drowning occurs awfully quickly — it's a matter of two or three minutes at the most."

Both Fisher and Helpern agreed that an exact determination of the cause of death would be virtually impossible at this time. They explained that chemical alterations caused by embalming and natural deterioration would have virtually erased any traces of salt deposits on the lungs — an indication that drowning had occurred by inhalation of brackish water.

"IT MAY BE possible to find traces of microscopic

bacteria or plankton that occur in brackish water," said Fisher, "and it might show a small difference in salt concentration between the lungs and other tissue. But such evidence would only be suggestive, not conclusive."

An analysis of Miss Kopechne's blood was made shortly after the body was recovered, revealing a small but insignificant alcohol content. There was no evidence that she had taken narcotics or other drugs. While doubting the medical value of a court-directed autopsy at this date, medical authorities were unanimous in condemning the decision not to perform one at the time.

"The death of a young woman without prior illness is reason for an autopsy under any circumstances, no matter who she is," said Dr. Helpern. "Not to do so in this case allows all sorts of ugly speculation."

FISHER AGREED. "I think this medical examiner was negligent," he said. "I can't understand why he

didn't do an immediate autopsy."

According to Donald P. Mills, the associate medical examiner for Dukes County, the decision not to perform an autopsy was based on his understanding of the state statutes. He said he understood the permission of the district attorney was needed for all autopsies. Massachusetts legal authorities, however, said this was once the state law but it was changed in 1945 giving the medical examiner full responsibility.

Acting on this mistaken impression of the law, Mills phoned the state police after the body was recovered and asked them to query D. A. Edmund Dinis on the need for an autopsy.

"I told them I felt the evidence of drowning was good," Mills recalls in the current issue of Medical World News. "I also mentioned that she was a secretary of the Kennedys. The D.A. sent a message back saying that if there was no evidence of foul play, an autopsy wouldn't be needed."

MILLS SAID when he made the call at 10:15 a.m., he had not yet learned that Kennedy was the driver of the car. And although the senator had reported the accident nearly an hour earlier, the D.A. claims he didn't learn of his involvement in the accident until noon.

Mills said he phoned the D.A., through the state police, later that day to ask for advice on what to tell reporters. According to his account, the officer replied:

"Tell them the girl died of accidental drowning, that's all. If they persist, slam down the receiver."

Mills said that a week later he was told by an assistant district attorney he would have to take full responsibility for the lack of an autopsy.

When Mills pointed out the D.A. had known Kennedy was the driver of the car in time to order an autopsy, the assistant reportedly said:

"You're saying that because he was factually aware, he was legally aware."

BY NOW the main tar-

get of criticism from the medical and legal profession, Mills came under fire again the following day—this time from his own supervisor, Dr. Nevin, who had been taking a day off when the accident occurred.

Mills said Nevin criticized him for letting the autopsy go and said it would never have happened if he had been there. As a result, reports Mills, the two men now avoid each other in the halls of the hospital and in the office.

Mills's failure to perform an autopsy was mildly defended by Dr. Helpern, who said that despite the way the law reads, it may be customary to consult the D.A. on such matters. "You get 50 miles away in the boonocks and the D.A. tells you what to do," he said.

Meanwhile, the role of D.A. Dinis was further muddied by his past political contacts with the Kennedys. Local papers reported that when Dinis was running for Congress from the Southern District several years ago, the D.A. asked for Kennedy's en-

dorsement and was refused.

HE WAS subsequently defeated by a wide margin, after which he reportedly told friends that he would "get" Kennedy.

Dinis refused to talk to reporters during an appearance Thursday at the county courthouse, where a hearing on his request for exhumation was postponed. The judge elected instead to first hear the appeal by Miss Kopechne's parents to dismiss the request.