

Overseers of Morgue Often Occasion

By ANNA QUINDLEN

The corridors are clean, the atmosphere is antiseptic, the wall of file drawers deceptively like a storage area in any place of business.

But in the city morgue, those drawers hold the remains of violent or suspicious death, and in contrast with the anonymous sterility of the surroundings, the Medical Examiner's office and the men who have overseen it have often been a focus of publicity and controversy.

The ouster Tuesday of Michael M. Baden from his position as Chief Medical Examiner by Mayor Koch, following complaints by a District Attorney and the Director of the city's Health Department, was the latest example of the controversy surrounding the office. But, given the dependence of law enforcement authorities upon their powers of detection, their discretion and their expertise, the Medical Examiners can frequently draw fire. And in the largest city in the nation, where violent crime is almost epidemic and medical frontiers are crossed with regu-

larity, the Chief Medical Examiner of New York City is often in the news as an expert on both.

Dr. Baden held the position on probation for 15 months. His predecessor, Dominick J. DiMaio, retired after less than two years in the job. So if any one individual is responsible for the primacy of the city office, it would be the late Milton Helpern, who was the Medical Examiner for two decades, stepping down only when forced to at mandatory retirement age.

Crimmins and Coppolino Cases

Part Dr. Watson, part Sherlock Holmes, Dr. Helpern figured in some of the country's most sensational murder cases, including the trial of Alice Crimmins, the Queens woman convicted of slaying her two small children, and Dr. Carl Coppolino, the Florida physician accused of injecting his first wife with a fatal dose of muscle relaxant. In both cases Dr. Helpern's testimony was said to have contributed to convictions, despite the word of other pathologists who differed with his testimony.

Dr. Helpern was only the third Medical

Examiner in the city. His two predecessors, Dr. Charles Norris and Dr. Thomas A. Gonzales, can be seen in a rather large oil painting in the office at 520 First Avenue, with the young Dr. Helpern assisting them in an autopsy. Those who have had dealings with the office over the years say that he shaped it in his own image. "He was an extremely flamboyant individual, very knowledgeable, and not one to hide behind a bushel," said Justice Burton E. Roberts of State Supreme Court, who was Bronx District Attorney when Dr. Helpern was still leading the office. "He actually built up the reputation of that office into a great office that was known nationwide and that was in the limelight."

Complaints Came at Last

Only in the last years of his tenure, when some discontented staff doctors complained that he had hung on to his job too long, did the bad publicity sometimes outweigh the good. The Times published a series of articles which included a report that the Medical Examiner's office had severed the head of an unidentified woman who was believed to have been

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Spirited Debate

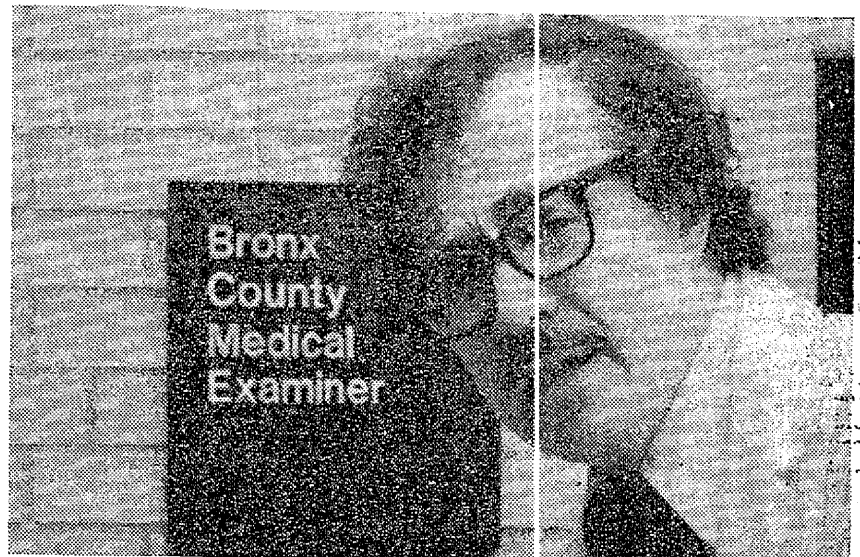
drowned and discovered only by chance later that the head contained a bullet. There was also a charge that a baby was mistakenly cremated after the Medical Examiner's office released the body to a funeral home.

"When you make yourself that visible, you can't afford to make those kind of mistakes," said a police officer, who asked that his name not be used in the wake of the Baden dismissal. "The M.E. has to be part police officer and part lawyer and nobody likes the police or their attorney to make stupid mistakes."

Beame Appointed DiMaio

Dr. Helpern retired soon after those events, but even the search for his successor was undertaken in the public eye. The controversy over who would succeed him centered on the selection process: Dr. DiMaio and Dr. Baden had identical scores on a civil service test but Dr. DiMaio's seniority and veteran's credits catapulted him ahead of Dr. Baden and eventually led to his appointment by Mayor Beame.

Although Dr. Helpern had not supported Dr. DiMaio — who himself gener-



The New York Times / William E. Sauro

Dr. Michael M. Baden at Jacobi Medical Center in the Bronx

ated controversy when he drew criticism from medical groups for insisting that autopsies be performed on bodies before transplant organs were removed — he was reportedly more pleased with his appointment than he would have been with

Dr. Baden's, which came after his death. Dr. Helpern was convinced that Dr. Baden has spread bad publicity about his office in order to drive him out, and accordingly christened him "young Sir Galahad."