

Medical Examiners Criticize Actions on Cult Bodies

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The Government's actions concerning the bodies of 911 People's Temple members who died in Guyana two weeks ago was illogical and based on dubious legal principles, according to several medical examiners not connected with the investigation of the deaths.

Six leading medical examiners said in interviews that they recognized the logistical and other difficulties involved in the gruesome task of identifying the bodies. But they said it was clear from developments that the Government had no established procedure for medical investigation of such situations, and that similar mishandling would occur if another catastrophe, such as a plane crash, occurred today.

"Of the several ways the situation could have been handled, certainly the one chosen was the most unsatisfactory," said Dr. Sidney B. Weinberg, Medical Examiner for Suffolk County, N. Y.

The medical examiners described as "inept," "incompetent," "embarrassing" and "doing it backwards" what they contended was the Government's failure to meet a basic social and legal responsibility to determine the manner and cause of deaths of the cult members.

They criticized, among other things, the failure thus far to perform autopsies and the embalming of bodies before collection of samples for toxicological tests. They also criticized the awkward steps by which the Government, in a reversal of an earlier policy, now plans to do autopsies on seven of the 911 bodies.

Dr. Weinberg and other medical examiners said the Government should have sent a team of specialists in forensic medicine to Guyana immediately to collect samples for toxicological tests, to take photographs of the scene, to do autopsies, and to conduct as orderly an investigation as possible under the circumstances. Such a step would have greatly facilitated later medical investigations, Dr. Weinberg said.

The medical experts also criticized, on medical and humanitarian grounds, the Government's decision to fly the bodies here instead of to an Army mortuary in Oakland, Calif., that would have been nearer to most relatives. Proximity to relatives would aid in a medical investigation, they said.

State Department officials said Dover was chosen because the shorter distance from Guyana allowed a quicker turnaround time for the flights removing the bodies. But the medical examiners contended that months of investigational

time might have been lost for the sake of saving a few hours of flying time.

Dr. Leslie I. Lukash, Medical Examiner for Nassau County, N. Y., said that autopsies would be the most important step in determining how many of the People's Temple group were shot or poisoned. Such information is crucial in determining whether an individual committed suicide or was murdered, an important question in insurance settlements.

Without autopsies, Dr. Lukash said, "Everything is presumptive about the cause and manner of death."

Dr. Lukash criticized the Justice Department's plan to do autopsies on four randomly selected bodies to confirm cyanide poisoning as the cause of death for the group, saying "no court will accept that" as evidence of how all members of the group died.

The medical examiners were particularly disturbed by the Government's steps in seeking to do autopsies on the four bodies as well as on those of the cult's leader, the Rev. Jim Jones, his mistress, Maria Katsaris, and Dr. Larry Schacht, the physician who purportedly mixed the cyanide poison drunk by cult members.

Legal Problem Cited

Justice Department officials have said that no Federal legislation authorizes autopsies on the bodies of people who are murdered or die in foreign countries or on Federal property in this country. Exceptions are made for a President and other Government officials.

Department officials have said that if permission from relatives is not granted for the seven autopsies, they will ask Delaware officials to order them under state law.

Dr. Cyril Wecht, Medical Examiner for Allegheny County (Pittsburgh), said, "This is the worst possible way because it puts a club to a family's head and it could create legal problems if court approval becomes necessary." The medical examiners said that when



Syringes and pill bottles littered after the mass deaths.

circumstances make it necessary to do an autopsy for medical-legal reasons, it is standard policy to proceed without asking permission from relatives.

Dr. Wecht, who is a lawyer and a doctor specializing in forensic pathology, contended that even in the absence of a specific Federal law, the United States could have proceeded with the autopsies. "When you come across 900 bodies that didn't die naturally, that's a medical, legal situation," he said.

"It would be just as illegal to do four autopsies as to do 900 under these circumstances. If you rob a bank of \$10 or \$10 million, you're still a bank robber," he said.

Dr. Lukash, addressing himself to the same point, said: "If they wanted to do the autopsies, they'd do them."

Wecht