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Kennedy Autopsy At Wrong Place

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Of the Associated Press

DALLAS

The siren's wail died, and ambulance attendants wheeled the body of a wounded man into Parkland Hospital's emergency room.

He had a massive head wound. The emergency team had seen blood and broken bodies before — the victims of chance, carelessness or hatred. But this man was the President of the United States, John F. Kennedy. And he was dying.

From a clinical point of view, Kennedy was just another murder victim and his body was part of the evidence needed to find his killer. That evidence was so critical the post-mortem examination was not done at the hospital in Dallas but at one of the nation's largest military facilities, Bethesda Naval Hospital near Washington.

Medical authorities in Dallas contend that was the wrong decision. And they say it wouldn't have been made today, with one of the nation's best forensic medicine centers in Dallas.

The Dallas County Institute of Forensic Medicine has been developed since the Kennedy assassination in 1963. It has been run since 1969 by Dr. Charles S. Petty, whose office is about 200 yards from the emergency room where Kennedy died.

The institute has a sophisticated crime lab for the analysis of drugs, poisons and weapons as well as bodies.

"The people in Washington who did the autopsy had a dead body who had been worked on by surgeons in an attempt to save his life," Petty said in an interview. "The post-mortem should have been done in Dallas. The autopsy had to be correlated with what went on in Dallas. The whole investigation has to be co-ordinated in a system like we have here now."

For example, Petty said, basic information that surgeons performed a tracheotomy on Kennedy and obliterated a bullet hole was not relayed to Washing-

ton in the confusion.

Had the assassination occurred today and "the powers that be insisted that the President be taken back to Washington, I would have at least insisted going along too, with at least one surgeon and all the X rays and evidence we could take with us," Petty said.

Parkland Hospital's administrator, Jack Price, who also held that post in 1963, said then-medical examiner Earl Rose wanted to hold the President's body in Dallas, but was convinced to let it go because of the circumstances.

"Everything is neatly correlated for efficiency," said Petty of the forensic center, which has a staff of 70.

One of about 350 forensic pathologists in the country, Petty also is a teacher. He oversees forensic medicine education at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School at Parkland, and administers forensic science instruction law enforcement agencies in the county.

A criminal investigation can be bungled at any point during the process, Petty said, so the education of everyone connected is part of his job.

"If a police officer sees a dead man slumped in a chair with a bullet hole in his head and a gun at his side, 98 times out of 100 it's a suicide. But what about the two times it's not. He's got to give us a chance to look at the evidence."

Petty said the institute spent 750 hours last year teaching law enforcement personnel the basics, such as not handling a gun at the scene of a shooting. "It's a big hangup when law enforcement officers don't know what to look for, and can't assume that what looks obvious is fact," Petty said.

Tom Hudson, in charge of communications, identification and records for the Dallas Police Department, often works closely with Petty.

"The way we have it set up, with all the operations at one facility, it is the forerunner of how law enforcement will be handled in the future," Hudson said.

"This facility is unique to my knowledge and is one of the greatest things that ever happened to support our handling of criminal cases."