

Suicide Tale Questioned

Autopsy belies CIA version of researcher's '53 death

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Washington — Preliminary results of a forensic examination appear to contradict government assertions that germ-warfare researcher Frank R. Olson, who died in 1953 after unwittingly taking LSD in a CIA experiment, jumped to his death from a Manhattan hotel.

Multiple fractures to Olson's skull did not appear consistent with a 13-story fall, according to James E. Starrs, a George Washington University professor of law and forensic science, who was asked by Olson's family to examine his body. Starrs, who examined Olson's remains

after they were exhumed in June in Frederick, Md., said injuries to the skull and other parts of Olson's body suggested that his death was not the simple suicide the government has portrayed for 40 years.

Starrs' early findings add to the Olson family's decades-old suspicion that Olson was slain. Family members believe Olson, one of the nation's top germ-warfare researchers, was killed because LSD he unknowingly took made him erratic and irrational and a threat to reveal classified information.

The CIA has denied any foul play in Olson's death, which occurred while a

CIA agent was in the room. At the time, the agent told police he awakened to a loud noise and discovered the hotel window smashed and Olson lying on the sidewalk below.

CIA spokesman David Christian said Monday that he was unaware of Starrs' team's findings and could not comment. He said the death had been investigated thoroughly and no evidence of homicide ever had been discovered.

In 1975, the family learned that Olson was an unknowing participant in a secret

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AP Photo
Researcher Frank Olson

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CIA program to study the possible uses of LSD and other drugs for intelligence or military purposes.

Nine days before Olson's death on Nov. 28, 1953, a CIA scientist slipped LSD into Olson's after-dinner drink. The normally cheerful Olson became depressed and began behaving erratically.

President Gerald Ford invited Olson's family to the White House in 1975 to personally apologize, and the government paid the family \$750,000 to settle its claim in his death.

"There are so many fractures in the skull that it was not possible that he received this type of injury simply from falling out of a window," Starrs said.

Also, Starrs said his team found no evidence of the glass cuts described in the original New York autopsy report. He said Olson's body was preserved well enough for such cuts to have been visible. If Olson smashed through the hotel window to his death, his body would have been cut, pathologists said.

Starrs said his examination showed that Olson landed on his feet, shattering both legs and causing massive internal trauma that left him dead within minutes. The type of injuries Olson received in his fall seem inconsistent with the skull fractures, Starrs said.

Starrs said he would conduct further tests on Olson's skull to determine how the damage was caused.