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Doctor Wants JFK's 'Dang

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DID PRESIDENT KENNEDY have Addison's disease?

When the rumor first ran through Washington eight years ago, the then Sen. Kennedy denied it, saying that he suffered only a "partial adrenal insufficiency" brought on by the malaria he picked up in the South Pacific in World War II.

Then in 1960, just before the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles, Lyndon Johnson's backers insisted that Kennedy was an "Addisonian."

"I object to this muscle-flexing about his youth, as if he were in better health than anybody else," said India Edwards, vice chairman of Citizens for Johnson. "If it weren't for cortisone, Sen. Kennedy wouldn't be alive."

Except for a time when the Warren Commission's autopsy findings came under public fire, President Kennedy's adrenals have since been discussed only in private—until now.

From the journal of the American Medical Association last week came the claim that President Kennedy had indeed been a victim of Addison's disease, and for proof it cited the report of a team of New York surgeons in the A.M.A.'s own Archives of Surgery almost 12 years ago.

In the November, 1955, issue of Archives, writes Dr. John Nichols, a pathologist on the staff of the University of Kansas Medical Center, three surgeons from New York's Hospital for Special Surgery told of a spinal operation they performed on an unidentified 37-year-old man with "known Addison's disease."

The patient suffered from a back ailment, the Archives article said, that "caused him great pain" and upset his "daily routine." While spinal surgery was the answer, the surgeons were reluctant to perform it because of the man's Addison's disease, which by reducing his vital hormone output made him a poor surgical risk.

But the surgeons decided to operate anyway, the article went on, if only

because without surgery, the patient would become paralyzed. The operation lasted more than three hours and required placing a metal plate into the patient's spine to bring about "lumbosacral fusion together with sacroiliac fusion" of a pair of slipped disks.

During surgery, the patient was given four pints of blood and massive amounts of salt and cortisone to compensate for the defective adrenals that are the hallmark of Addison's disease.

The first operation was only a partial success, said the Archives article, and four months later the patient underwent surgery again, at which time the plate was removed from his spine.

Everything Matched

AN EXPERT in Addison's disease, Dr. Nichols had read the article when it appeared in the Archives 12 years ago. He had also read of the claims that President Kennedy was a victim of Addison's disease, both at the time of the 1960 campaign and again when the Warren Commission was

erous' Disease Publicized

criticized for not releasing details of the autopsy.

"It took me 'awhile," Dr. Nichols said last week, "but once my subconscious and curiosity got me, it was a simple matter of two and two."

This meant comparing the Archives article with newspaper accounts of spinal surgery undergone by President Kennedy when he was a Senator. To Dr. Nichols's surprise, everything matched—the men's age, ailment, even the hospital they went to for surgery and the dates surgery was performed: New York's Hospital for Special Surgery, Oct. 21 for the first operation; Feb. 11 for the second.

"It is most unlikely," wrote Dr. Nichols in last week's A.M.A. Journal, "that two persons with the same age and clinical history of the late President would have undergone similar surgery in the same hospital on the same day and returned on exactly the same time four months later for removal of the plates."

A slow degeneration of the adrenal glands, Addison's disease is named for

British surgeon Thomas Addison, who recognized it as a side effect of tuberculosis in 1855. Indeed, tuberculosis can destroy almost 90 per cent of the adrenal glands' ability to make cortisone and cortisone-like hormones, which regulate the body's use of salt, water, carbohydrates, fat and protein.

Addison's disease develops insidiously. First, the victim's skin darkens. He feels nauseated, loses weight and has spells of depression and irritability.

Ultimately, the true Addisonian is so weakened that he cannot raise his hand without difficulty. At its worst, the disease is a killer. Even excessive perspiration has brought death to Addisonians.

But that was before cortisone began to bring Addison's disease under control and before other drugs conquered tuberculosis, which causes the most serious form of Addison's disease. Other kinds of Addison's disease result from fungus attack, severe allergies or excess exposure to cold.

Malnutrition can cause Addison's disease by shutting down the pituitary gland's production of the hormone ACTH. ACTH is the body's message-carrier, and without it to tell the adrenals when to turn on and off, they can literally wither from disuse.

Even an overdependence on cortisone to kill arthritic pain can cause a mild case of Addison's disease by slowing down the adrenal's output of natural cortisone.

No Handicap Now

WHATEVER CAUSED President Kennedy's "adrenal insufficiency," there is no evidence that it was tuberculosis or that it ever handicapped him. Indeed, through the miracle of cortisone, which the President took regularly, the death rate from Addison's disease is down to one in 200, with most victims leading normal lives.

Dr. Nichols recognized this in last week's A.M.A. Journal. "The fact that President Kennedy was continuously engaged in strenuous mental and physical activity," he wrote, "tolerated ex-

tensive surgical trauma and became father of four children, all without decrease in life expectancy, is noteworthy."

Then why all the fuss about President Kennedy's adrenals? When the Warren Commission failed to make public full details of the Kennedy autopsy, the German magazine Der Stern said the findings were suppressed for fear they would say that the President suffered from Addison's disease.

"There is no medical reason," Der Stern said, "why a man afflicted with this disease should not be President, but politically, Kennedy's illness could become dangerous. Addison's disease—it sounds sinister. Few Americans know of it and its symptoms."

A Public Right

DR. NICHOLS CARRIES this point further. "The autopsy protocol is curiously silent on the point of Addison's disease," he wrote, "as well as on details of the pituitary, of his vertebral column and sacroiliac joints. The silence on these points may be due to (a) accidental or intentional failure to search and observe, or (b) suppression of autopsy findings and clinical records by relatives or Federal officials, or both."

"This writer agrees," Dr. Nichols went on, "that the public is entitled to knowledge of the health of their Chief Executive and candidates for this office. Details of the final illnesses of other Presidents who died or were assassinated in office have been disclosed and extensively discussed in medical journals."

To Dr. Nichols, full disclosure of presidential illnesses is a necessity, and he has no intention of stopping where he started last week. "I'm writing a book about the Warren Report," he said, "where I'll dissect the autopsy."