

Olson Files Show Warning on LSD

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By Bill Richards
Washington Post Staff Writer

CIA agents apparently ignored orders and warnings from senior agency officials when they ran an LSD experiment that triggered the 1953 suicide of civilian Army scientist Frank R. Olson, according to CIA files on the case.

The documents—an inch-thick file containing 66 notes, memos and reports—were released today by Olson's family. The CIA was ordered to make the documents available to the family last July by President Ford after it was revealed that the CIA kept circumstances of Olson's death secret from the family for 22 years.

The documents show that six months before Olson's death Richard Helms, then a senior CIA official under Director Allen Dulles, warned

a staff meeting of agency officers that LSD was "dynamite" and that he should be consulted before it was ever used by agents.

Not long after Helms' warning, another top CIA official, Frank Wisner, who was then the agency's deputy director for plans, sent a memo to the technical services staff ordering that the drug not be used without his permission.

Excerpts from the diary of the CIA's inspector general at the time of Olson's death show that Wisner and Helms denied knowing anything about the experiment. Neither official was notified, according to the records, before three agents from the technical services staff, with the approval of senior staff officials, slipped LSD to a group of seven unwitting Army researchers, including Olson, who were

gathered at a meeting set up by the CIA in western Maryland.

Nine days after the incident, Olson jumped to his death from a 10th floor New York City hotel room. The scientist had suffered a mental breakdown caused by the LSD experiment, according to the CIA records.

The files also indicate that at least one top CIA official, general counsel Lawrence R. Houston, sharply criticized the agents' handling of the experiment.

In a memo to the CIA's inspector general, who was conducting an investigation into Olson's suicide, Houston noted that the technical services staff and the agents who ran the experiment failed to take "normal and reasonable precautions."

In cases where human life and health is at stake, Houston

wrote, "at least the prudent reasonable measures which can be taken to minimize the risk must be taken and failure to do so is culpable negligence."

Despite this internal admission, CIA officials—including some involved in the Olson experiment—continued and expanded the agency's drug testing program until the early 1960s, according to testimony presented by the CIA last November before a Senate subcommittee of Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) looking into federal medical experiments on humans.

The program—identified in the CIA documents on the Olson death as "Operation Artichoke"—involved giving

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hundreds of persons LSD without their knowledge.

In testimony before the Kennedy subcommittee, CIA officials said that some persons were hospitalized because of the program and the CIA never checked on the after effects on any who received the drug.

After Olson's suicide, the CIA document file says, top agency officials approved a plan to cover up the agency's part in the experiment and Olson's death. The plan—known as "backstopping" in CIA parlance—involved lying to investigators either from the Army or Olson's insurance company.

The CIA files show that Dulles also decided not to reprimand officially those involved in the incident. That decision was made after a memo from the agency's research director, Luis de Florez, warned that any reprimand could affect "the initiative and enthusiasm so necessary to our work."

Olson's suicide was widely

reported last year after the scientist's family announced it was planning to sue the CIA and force the release to the public of all information surrounding the incident.

Last month the Olsons said

they had agreed not to sue the CIA in return for a settlement of \$1.25 million and full release of the CIA's Olson file.

David Kairys, the Olson's attorney, said that he believes the family has gained all the information it could but a statement by the Olson family that was also released today noted that the documents contained "inaccuracies and self-serving statements."

"These documents—which the CIA inspector general has sworn in an affidavit are all of the available documents—tell much of the story," said the family's statement. Kairys declined to elaborate on the statement.

All the information contained in the file has been turned over to the Senate

intelligence committee investigating the CIA, the attorney said.

According to the documents—all of which have been declassified by the CIA—the agency was deeply involved in LSD research by the time of Olson's death in 1953.

A memo from the head of the technical services staff, Willis Gibbons, states that the agency was funding LSD research in New York City, Boston, Lexington, Ky., and Chicago.

In addition, Gibbons' memo states that the agency was supplying LSD to George White, head of the narcotics division of the Treasury Department's New York district. "Has good access to criminal types in N. Y." the memo says of White without explanation.

Gibbons also noted that his department tried to determine who had access to LSD stocks in Atsugi, Japan, and Manila—the only two field stations with the drug in 1953, according to the documents.

The Olson case documents indicate that despite Helms' warning about LSD the CIA was not prepared for

psychological problems among the subjects of its drug tests.

It was apparently only after Olson's suicide that CIA officials began checking into the medical background of Dr. Harold A. Abramson, the psychiatrist Olson was assigned to for free treatment by the CIA.

In a memo four days after Olson's death, a CIA official notes that Abramson, an LSD researcher from New York City, "is a physician but not

known as a psychiatrist." The memo notes Abramson's "high stature in medicine" as an allergist. "A reliable source has advised that to be an authority on allergies one would have to take courses in psychosomatic sciences but this does not make one a psychiatrist," the memo notes.

In addition, the CIA file suggests several other inconsistencies involving Abramson.

The psychiatrist filed several reports with the CIA, noting that after nearly eight hours of interviews with Olson he found that Olson had been experiencing severe mental instability for months before the LSD episode. Four other reports from close friends of Olson, however, deny this.

The file also notes that Abramson told a CIA agent immediately after Olson's suicide that he "wanted to be kept out of this thing completely." A short time later, the psychiatrist called the agent back and said he had changed his mind.

On the evening after Olson's death, two CIA agents visited Abramson. One agent, who had accompanied Olson to New York went into an inner office to discuss the case. The second agent, who remained outside, was able in a method not explained in the report to eavesdrop on the inner office conversation, according to a document.

"Dr. Abramson was heard to remark to Robert Lashbrook (the agent) that he was 'worried as to whether or not the deal was in jeopardy' and that he thought 'that the operation was dangerous and that the whole deal should be re-analyzed.'" according to the agent's report of the conversation.

Abramson was not available for comment on the Olson case, and the CIA documents do not make clear what "deal" Abramson was referring to. A CIA spokesman yesterday declined to comment on any of the documents relating to Olson's death.