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**Murder Suspected in Deaths
Of Patients in Mich. Hospital**

By Joel D. Weisman

Special to The Washington Post
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22—A number of respiratory arrests at the Veterans Administration Hospital here—including some that were fatal—were murder and attempted murder, a top hospital official said today.

"We have ruled out medical coincidence, error and drug contamination," said Dr. Duane T. Freier, acting chief of staff of the nine-story VA Hospital.

"That leaves us with the fact that some—perhaps many—of the arrests were caused by someone . . . somebody . . .

with intent," he said in an interview.

Since July 1, there have been 51 respiratory arrests at the hospital—34 of them, including eight fatalities, since July 28. It was not immediately known how many of the 51 arrests were fatal. Officials were still checking their records today.

Authorities originally had been checking arrests since July 28, but now have expanded the inquiries back to July 1.

All of the victims were receiving food or medication through intravenous devices.

The deaths recall a case in Petersburg, Va., where Lee Roy Hargrave Jr., a hospital nurse's aide, was sentenced to

life in prison May 6 after being convicted of first-degree murder.

Two Petersburg General Hospital patients testified that they received injections from Hargrave, lost consciousness and lived to tell about it. Hargrave was charged with murdering six patients and convicted in one of the deaths. He was accused of injecting the patients with massive overdoses of the heart-relaxing drug lidocaine.

Joe Bailey, assistant special agent in the Detroit FBI office, said there "are now no suspects in the Ann Arbor deaths." He declined to confirm that the case is now

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criminal, rather than medical, but said, "Our investigation is along the lines of one that would be conducted in a murder case."

The fact that many of the respiratory failures were intentionally caused was confirmed with the results of a laboratory test showing the presence of Pavulon—a powerful muscle-paralyzing drug—in the urine of two patients who suffered, and survived, an arrest, medical sources said.

Pavulon, which is not a prescription drug, is generally used in surgery or in cases where artificial respirators are employed. In such cases breathing muscles must be temporarily paralyzed so they do not resist artificial respiration.

When Pavulon and other drugs like it are used, the first muscles relaxed are those used for breathing in the lungs. A respiratory arrest is the stoppage of breathing, as contrasted with a cardiac arrest, where the heart stops beating prior to cessation of breathing.

Pavulon, which was kept in unlocked cabinets, was readily available to the hospital's 700-member staff in the operating room, intensive care unit, and some ward floors where respirators were used, hospital officials said.

Since the rash of respiratory arrests, however, the drug has

been placed under lock and key.

The finding of Pavulon, (the brand name of pancuronium), in the urine of the arrest victim, follows earlier medical discounting of contaminated intravenous fluid, or medical coincidence.

Coming here today to examine the test results and get a personal update on the investigation is Dr. John D. Chase, chief medical director of the VA, who is flying here from Washington. Earlier this week, the VA sent a Washington-based team of medical investigators to assist in the investigation.

The rash of respiratory arrest intensified last Friday with three arrests on one floor within a 20-minute period. Four persons died of respiratory arrest that day. It was after these episodes that the FBI was called into the case.

Authorities are uncertain whether the arrests were intended to be fatal or merely designed "to create emergency, trauma-like atmospheres," as one high VA spokesman said. "The suspect may have been like an arsonist, who likes to see flames and fire engines, but doesn't intend to kill people."

In cases of respiratory arrest, all available medical, surgical, and anesthetic personnel respond to what is commonly known as a Code 7 alarm, explained Dr. Joseph Zibrak, 26, an intern. "There could be 20

people responding, and it's quite a hectic scene," he said.

Zibrak who has responded to 15 arrest calls since coming here July 1 after training at the larger Bellvue and University Hospitals in New York said:

"I've seen more arrests since I got here than I did at those hospitals—which are not exactly inactive places."

Freier said 12 to 15 arrests would have been normal here, compared to the 51 that occurred.

The FBI questioned dozens of those staff members answering the arrest emergency calls, seeking to determine if there was any "one person who seemed to be on hand for them all—either in a spectator or aid-giving role," said one intern who was questioned.

Agents are also trying to correlate arrest alarms with the work schedules of various staffers, though all officials concede "there isn't anything even resembling a suspect yet," as one FBI agent said.

Medical and law enforcement officials are also compiling lists of arrest victims and studying their respective medical histories in an effort to sort out which arrests may have been natural, "which are questionable, and which are clearly suspect and likely to have been caused by someone with intent," Freier said. Since such evaluations fall in the realm of "medical judgments, the total arrest figures

and deaths are really meaningless," he said.

If Pavulon were used in unnatural arrests, authorities say it was injected into rubber coupling devices on intravenous tubing. "This could be done in a matter of seconds, perhaps without the patient even being aware it was done," a medical source explained, adding:

"Since many substances are injected into such coupling devices it is virtually impossible to distinguish one needle hole from another."

Since last Friday, the hospital has been closed to all but emergency patients. Before halting admissions, a house doctors' organization had demanded that any incoming patients be notified in writing of the high incidence of respiratory arrests.

Since the FBI arrived on the scene, there have been no incidents of arrests. The FBI has primary jurisdiction in the base because the hospital is considered a federal enclave.

Despite many prior respiratory arrests, Arnold E. Mouish, the hospital administrator, declined to seek outside help sooner "because our overall death rate had remained about average for this time of year," he told The Washington Post in an interview earlier this week. Forty-six patients have died of various causes since July 1 at the hospital, which is considered one of the better VA facilities in the nation. Doctors at the hospital also hold appointments at the nearby University of Michigan Medical School. The school uses the hospital as a teaching facility

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Hospital Confirm Fifth Patient Sla

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Lee Roy Hargrave, Jr.

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Authorities Investigating the
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In Lieu of \$100,000 Bond

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PETERSBURG, Va., May 6—
Lee Roy Hargrave, Jr., a hos-
pital aide charged with
murder, was sentenced to
life in prison.

Deaths in Ann Arbor recall a headline-making case in Petersburg, Va., where a hospital aide was sentenced to life in prison.

Montage by Richard S. Carlton—The Washington Post