

Testing of Exhumed Bodies for Curare Is Expected to Require Several Weeks

By M. A. FARBER

The tests to determine whether a number of patients at Riverdell Hospital in Oradell, N.J., might have been murdered with curare nearly a decade ago should be completed within several weeks, according to the forensic pathologist who will coordinate the tests.

Dr. Michael M. Baden, the pathologist, said yesterday that the first of five bodies to be exhumed for the tests—some of which have never been tried before on body tissue—will be autopsied early next week at the Medical Examiner's office here.

Dr. Baden, who is the city's Deputy Chief Medical Examiner, said the tests for finding curare would include a new technique capable of identifying amounts of the drug that "are not visible to the naked eye—much less than the point of a pin."

Other authorities who will participate in the tests, he said, are the chief toxicologist for Suffolk County, Dr. Leo Dal Cortivo, and curare experts in the anesthesia department at the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Columbia University.

"We just don't know," Dr. Baden said, when asked the chances of finding curare in bodies that have been buried for nearly a decade. "It hasn't been tried before."

Inquiry Reopened

The tests will be conducted at the request of Bergen County Prosecutor Joseph C. Woodcock Jr., who has reopened an investigation into the possible murder in 1966 of nine or more patients at Riverdell Hospital, a small osteopathic hospital. Mr. Woodcock reopened the official investigation after an extensive inquiry into the deaths by The New York Times in recent months.

The original investigation in late 1966 centered on whether a surgeon at Riverdell, possibly insane or motivated by a desire to discredit his colleagues, had used curare to kill other surgeons' patients while they were recovering in their hospital rooms from operations.

Curare is often administered to relax muscles during surgery but the respiratory depressant can be lethal if improperly used.

Eighteen vials of curare—most of them empty or nearly so—were found in the surgeon's locker at the hospital in November 1966 after it was opened by a colleague who had come to suspect the surgeon of killing patients.

The surgeon denied any wrongdoing during the original investigation by Guy W. Calissi, who was then the Bergen County Prosecutor. He said he was using curare in experiments on "dying dogs" at a medical school.

No Interview Granted

Because the surgeon had not been charged with any crime, his name is being withheld and he is being referred to as Dr. X. He has declined to be interviewed.

Mr. Woodcock has said that the likelihood that any prosecution will result from his current investigation depends heavily on the discovery of curare in the bodies of one or more of the nine patients whose deaths, Dr. Baden has said, were "not explainable by natural disease processes."

The tests will have two purposes, Dr. Baden said in an interview yesterday.

The first will be to determine whether the patients died of the causes officially cited in 1966; the second will be to determine whether curare is present in the bodies.

The first body to be exhumed will be that of Nancy Savino. The sudden and unexpected death of the 4-year-old child, who was operated on in March 1966 for removal of cysts affecting her small intestine, was originally attributed to an "undetermined physiological reaction." An autopsy in 1966 found no anatomical or pathological cause of death.

Dr. Baden will perform the autopsy on the child with the assistance of Dr. Edwin H. Albano, the chief medical examiner of New Jersey, and Dr. Dominick J. Di Maio, the city's Acting Chief Medical Examiner.

As with the four other persons who will be exhumed, tissue samples will be taken from the child's body and will be examined by Dr. Dal Cortivo. The Suffolk County toxicologist has refined a process for isolating a fraction of tissue that might contain a drug such as curare.

The ground-up tissue will then be turned over to curare experts at the College of Physicians and Surgeons. For two years, anesthesiologists there have been doing clinical studies on a technique for finding curare in blood and urine that was developed by Dr. Sydney Spector, chief pharmacologist at the Roche Institute of Molecular Biology in Nutley, N. J. The technique has not previously been used at Columbia on tissues.

The tissue supplied by Dr. Dal Cortivo will be mixed into a curare antibody solution and a solution of known radioactive curare. If the tissue contains curare, according to medical scientists at Columbia, it can be measured in the radioactive count of the antibody.

Stable Compounds

Both Dr. Baden and experts at Columbia said that curare was believed to be a relatively stable compound that might remain in body tissues long after death if the drug was not excreted during life. But they conceded that they were on uncertain ground in this regard. "No one really knows what happens to the drug in a body after 10 years," an anesthesiologist at Columbia remarked.

Dr. Baden also said there was no way of knowing, in advance of exhumation, the conditions of the five bodies to be examined.

"Depending on any embalming, and on the weather and soil and other factors, body conditions vary greatly," he said. "But recently I autopsied the body of a 2,000-year-old American Indian found in a cave and the remains were sufficiently intact to permit identification of various disease processes."