

WOODCOCK TO ASK DR. X'S SUSPENSION

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Prosecutor Says Practice Should Be Halted During 2d Study of 13 Deaths

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Joseph C. Woodcock Jr., the Bergen County Prosecutor, said yesterday that he would ask New Jersey medical officials to consider suspending the license of Dr. X, pending the outcome of Mr. Woodcock's renewed inquiry into suspicious deaths at Riverdell Hospital in 1966.

The original investigation into 13 deaths over a 10-month period at the osteopathic hospital in Oradell, N. J., was "directed" against Dr. X, whose name is being withheld, after 18 vials of curare, a potentially lethal respiratory depressant, had been found in his locker at Riverdell. But that investigation, in late 1966, was dropped after two weeks.

Mr. Woodcock has declined to identify anyone as a target of the investigation he recently reopened. But he said in an interview yesterday that he had a "responsibility to the public" to ask New Jersey medical authorities to determine whether Dr. X's license should be suspended temporarily.

'Public Confidence'

"I'm not prejudging Dr. X," the Prosecutor said, "and I'm not asking that his name be pinned to any courthouse door. But it's important that public confidence in the physicians in New Jersey isn't shaken while our investigation goes forward."

Dr. X, a surgeon, still practices in New Jersey and is associated with at least two medical institutions. His name is being withheld because he has not been charged with any

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crime. The surgeon, who during the 1966 investigation denied any wrongdoing has declined to be interviewed. The 1966 investigation was conducted by Guy W. Calissi, then the Bergen County Prosecutor.

Dr. X's lawyer, who asked not to be identified, reiterated yesterday that his client was "totally innocent."

"If this man had done even a moral wrong I'd be among the most surprised lawyers in the history of jurisprudence," the lawyer said. "He's a gentle, nice retiring guy to whom this whole thing has been a horror. And he is incapable of being anything other than just a damn fine physician."

Officials of the New Jersey Board of Medical Examiners, which license physicians, could not be reached yesterday for comment on Mr. Woodcock's request regarding Dr. X's license. However a spokesman for the State Attorney General's office said the board had the power to suspend a doctor's license "if there is an immediate threat to public health."

Examiner Comments

The bodies of five patients who died at Riverdell in 1966 will be exhumed starting this week, to determine whether they died of the causes initially cited and whether their tissues contain curare, the respiratory depressant found in Dr. X's locker. Most of the 18 vials of the drug, which is sometimes used to relax muscles during surgery, were empty or nearly so.

Dr. Michael Baden, deputy chief medical examiner of New York City, has advised Mr. Woodcock that nine of the 13 deaths that figured in the original investigation in 1966 were "not explainable by natural disease processes" and were "consistent with death by a respiratory depressant such as curare."

The original investigation was touched off after Dr. Stanley Harris, another surgeon at Riverdell, deliberately opened Dr. X's locker on Oct. 31, 1966.

Dr. Harris later testified that he had come to suspect that Dr. X was killing patients of other surgeons at the hospital, perhaps in an effort to discredit his colleagues.

Dr. X, however, told the Prosecutor in 1966 that he was using curare in experiments on "dying dogs" at a medical school in New Jersey, and that he was saving the empty vials as part of his research.

Disclosure Lacking

Dr. X also maintained then that someone had disarranged his locker, removing certain items and placing into the locker two empty cartons of curare that were not his. He suggested that some of the curare vials might also not have belonged to him.

The investigation in 1966 was ended—for reasons that are still not clear and are under review by Mr. Woodcock—without being disclosed publicly or to state officials concerned with the operation of hospitals in New Jersey.

Information was gathered from the State Board of Medical Examiners about Dr. X's background, but the board was apparently not told, in 1966, the nature of the investigation involving Dr. X.

According to spokesman for the State Attorney General's office, a physician's license can be suspended for conduct that constitutes "malpractice or neglect or endangers the health or safety of a person—it encompasses quite a lot." But he noted that the events at River-

dell "are 10 years old" and the state licensing Board might be reluctant—on the basis of those events alone—to consider even a brief suspension.

"This particular case," he said, "is really up in the air."

Mr. Woodcock said that to help the board reach a decision he would allow it to examine the file on the 1966 investigation.

In another interview yesterday—on WNBC-TV's "Sunday" program—Mr. Woodcock said he had spoken to Dr. X's lawyer and expected to take a statement from Dr. X "in the coming weeks."

"He'll be available for questioning," the Prosecutor said.