

# Score of Deaths Suspect In Original 'Dr. X' Inquiry

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By M. A. FARBER JAN 13 1976

A doctor who helped to choose the 13 cases that figured in the original 1966 investigation of suspicious deaths at Riverdell Hospital in Oradell, N. J., said yesterday that more than 20 cases were turned over to the Bergen County Prosecutor at that time.

But eight or 10 cases in which county officials felt "there was a pretty good possibility that the patients died of natural causes" were quickly sent back to the hospital and deleted from the investigation, said Dr. Allan Lans, a Riverdell director.

Dr. Lans, who with Dr. Stanley Harris helped select the cases, said the eight of 10 cases "fell into gray area."

"You could argue that those patients had plenty of cause to die for natural reasons or you could argue that there was something suspicious about the cases and that the charts were incomplete," he said. "But the Prosecutor and the Medical Examiner discarded them, and we took them at their word. After all, we had 13 other cases."

Guy W. Calissi, the County Prosecutor who led the investigation in late 1966, said last night that he was unaware that any cases beyond the 13 had been submitted, by hospital officials.

"That's all we had," said Mr. Calissi, who is now a Superior Court judge. Dr. Lawrence Denson, a county medical examiner who assisted Mr. Calissi, could not be reached for comment.

Dr. Harris, now the chief surgeon at Riverdell, also said that more than 20 cases were initially considered for inclusion in the original inquiry. But he said he did not recall whether the hospital charts on more than 13 mortalities had been given to Mr. Calissi or Dr. Denson. There is no reference in the testimony taken by Mr. Calissi to more than 13 cases, and only 13 charts were included in the official file on the inquiry in 1966.

Joseph C. Woodcock Jr., the present Bergen County Prosecutor, is looking into the alleged dismissal of the eight to 10 cases, as part of his reopened investigation of the "unusual or unexplained" deaths at the small osteopathic hospital, according to law-enforcement sources.

In another development yesterday, Mr. Woodcock said he was trying to arrange for the New Jersey Board of Medical Examiners to consider as early as tomorrow the possibility of suspending the license of Dr. X pending the outcome of Mr. Woodcock's renewed inquiry.

Dr. X—whose name is being withheld by The New York Times and by Mr. Woodcock because he has not been charged with any crime—was the focus of the original investigation into the deaths at Riverdell. The 13 deaths occurred over a 10-month period, from December 1965 to October 1966.

Eighteen vials of curare, a

respiratory depressant, were found in Dr. X's locker at Riverdell after the locker was deliberately opened on Oct. 31, 1966, by Dr. Harris, a surgeon at the hospital who had come to suspect that Dr. X was killing the patients of his colleagues while the patients were recovering from operations.

Most of the 18 vials of curare were empty, or nearly so. And many of the 13 patients had died unexpectedly following respiratory arrests.

Dr. X, who now declines to be interviewed, denied any wrongdoing during the investigation in 1966 and said he was using curare in experiments on "dying dogs" at a medical school 15 to 20 miles from the hospital. He said he had saved the empty vials of curare as part of his research.

Despite much conflicting testimony and many unsolved questions, the original investigation was dropped after two weeks without being made public. The inquiry was recently reopened by Mr. Woodcock following an investigation into the deaths by The Times.

Mr. Woodcock has been advised by Dr. Michael M. Baden, a leading forensic pathologist, that nine of the 13 deaths were "not explainable by natural causes" and were consistent with death by a respiratory depressant.

Mr. Woodcock said on Sunday that he would ask the State Board of Medical Examiners to consider a temporary suspension of Dr. X's license until the Prosecutor's inquiry was completed. He said he was not "prejudging" Dr. X but wanted to assure public confidence in physicians in New Jersey during his inquiry.

Dr. X, a surgeon, is no longer affiliated with Riverdell, but he has a private practice and is associated with at least two medical institutions.

Dr. Edwin H. Albano, president of the Medical Examiners Board, said yesterday that the board had not yet received a request from Mr. Woodcock.

"What we do," he said, "will depend on the information he gives us."

The 15-member board, which licenses physicians and generally regulates medicine in the state, is scheduled to meet tomorrow and Mr. Woodcock said he was trying to assemble appropriate information for the board by then.

Tomorrow is also expected to be the date for the first of five exhumations of bodies of Riverdell patients who died in 1966. The bodies will be tested in New York or the presence of curare.

Like Dr. Lans, Dr. Harris said yesterday that the hospital charts on more than 20 patients had been turned over to Mr. Carlissi and Dr. Denson in November 1966. However, there is reference in the testimony taken by Mr. Carlissi to only 13 cases. And only 13 charts are included in the official file on the 1966 investigation.