

Jersey Licensing Board To Weigh a Dr. X Inquiry

NYTimes

By M. A. FARBER JAN 15 1976

The state board that licenses physicians in New Jersey agreed yesterday to consider whether it should investigate the activities of Dr. X, a surgeon who figures in a renewed inquiry by the Bergen County Prosecutor of suspicious deaths at Riverdell Hospital in Oradell in 1966.

At the same time, spokesmen for two medical institutions with which Dr. X is affiliated as a surgeon or teacher said in interviews that the institutions planned no action against Dr. X.

The surgeon's name has been withheld by The New York Times and has not been made public by Joseph C. Woodcock Jr., the Bergen County Prosecutor, because he has not been charged with any crime.

The New Jersey Board of Medical Examiners decided at a meeting in Princeton to consider "allegations set forth" in a confidential file submitted late Tuesday by Mr. Woodcock, according to Anthony LaBue, a deputy state attorney general who serves as counsel to the 15-member licensing board.

Mr. LaBue said the board would determine whether other information was needed before deciding whether an investigation of Dr. X was warranted.

"In the public interest," Mr. LaBue said, "the matter will be handled as quickly as possible."

Vials Found in Locker

The original investigation in late 1966 of 13 deaths over a 10-month period at Riverdell Hospital was "directed" against Dr. X after 18 vials of curare, most of them empty, were found in his locker. He denied any wrongdoing then and said he was using curare, a respiratory depressant, in research on dogs.

As part of his reopened investigation, Mr. Woodcock said last Sunday that he would ask the state licensing board to consider whether Dr. X's license should be suspended until the Prosecutor completed his inquiry.

Dr. X is no longer affiliated with Riverdell but is associated with at least one hospital as a surgeon and holds an unsalaried post as a teacher at a medical school.

Sybil Moses, an assistant Bergen County prosecutor, said in Hackensack yesterday that the file turned over to the board was 500 pages long and that Dr. X's name had been blacked out, pending a decision by the board on whether it saw "a prima facie case of malpractice" and wanted to investigate.

Mr. LaBue said after the meeting at the Treadway Inn in Princeton that most, if not all, board members somehow had known who Dr. X was before the meeting and that his name was also mentioned in the file prepared by Mrs. Moses.

Dr. X's lawyer, in a telephone interview, said he did not anticipate any action by the licensing board.

"My client is totally in-

nocent," he reiterated. "To be any action he has to have done something wrong, not just be the object of some silly investigation. There isn't a shred of proof against the man."

Mr. Woodcock reopened the Riverdell case following a recent inquiry into the deaths by The Times. The original investigation, conducted by Guy W. Calissi, then the Bergen County Prosecutor, was ended after two weeks despite much conflicting testimony and many unresolved questions.

Dr. Michael M. Baden, the city's deputy chief medical examiner, has advised Mr. Woodcock that nine of the 13 deaths included in the original investigation were "not explainable by natural disease processes" and were "consistent with death" by a drug such as curare.

Mr. Woodcock has ordered exhumations and reautopsies of five of the patients whose deaths were studied in the original investigation. The first reautopsy on the body of 4-year-old Nancy Savino, was done two days ago by Dr. Baden. Like the autopsy in 1966, the reautopsy disclosed no natural cause of death, according to Dr. Baden.

2d Reautopsy Due

The second reautopsy, on the body of 26-year Margaret Henderson, will be conducted next week.

Mrs. Henderson was admitted to Riverdell at 5:05 A.M. on April 22, 1966, complaining of severe abdominal pain. An exploratory incision by Dr. Stanley Harris found no abnormality. At 6:30 the following day Mrs. Henderson was found to be "tense and apprehensive." At 7:30 A.M. She was given a bath. Half an hour later, according to the hospital chart, she said she was unable to swallow and had pain in her legs and chest, and Dr. X started intravenous feeding. Whether the feeding tube was set up before or after her complaints is unclear.

Some time during the next 45 minutes Mrs. Henderson was visited by another doctor, the chart indicated. At 8:45 A.M. she was pronounced dead.

None of the 13 patients, including Mrs. Henderson, was operated on by Dr. X.

An autopsy attributed Mrs. Henderson's death to acute hepatic necrosis—hepatitis. But the pathologist who did the microscopic examination for the autopsy stated at the time that he had found nothing "clearly indicative of the cause of death."

Several Weeks Needed

Each of the exhumed bodies will be tested for the presence of curare, although medical scientists generally doubt that the drug can be identified in body tissues 10 years after burial. The tests, which have not begun, are expected to take several weeks.

Mr. LaBue, the counsel to the State Board of Medical Examiners, said that if an investigation of Dr. X was ordered by the board it would be handled in the "routine manner" by agents of the state's Department of Community Affairs.

Dr. X could be called before the board in a closed session, and would have the right to counsel. Any disciplinary action would require the assent of eight members of the 15-member board.

There were 12 members of the board at the meeting yesterday. A number of the members said privately that it was "incredible" or "astounding" that the Riverdell matter had not been brought to the board's attention during the investigation by Mr. Calissi in 1966.

The spokesman for a hospital with which Dr. X is now associated said the institution had "no firm reason or cause at this stage" to take any action against him.

"In our system of justice," he said, "a man is innocent until proven guilty."