

TWO MORE BODIES WILL BE EXHUMED

Curare Investigation Widens
Under Jersey Prosecutor

By M. A. FARBER

Two more bodies will be exhumed today and tomorrow in the widening new investigation into whether nine or more patients were murdered with curare over a 10-month period at a small New Jersey hospital a decade ago.

The investigation by the Bergen County Prosecutor Joseph C. Woodcock Jr., into the deaths at Riverdell Hospital in Oradell was disclosed a month ago.

Since then Mr. Woodcock has had the bodies of three former Riverdell patients exhumed, but the chemical tests to discover whether curare, a respiratory depressant, is present in the bodies have not been completed. The tests on the five bodies — the total number that were scheduled for exhumation — are expected to be finished within two weeks.

"We're doing a full, fair and impartial investigation and we're doing it in a very orderly fashion," Mr. Woodcock said yesterday. "We're not drawing any conclusions until we've seen the results of the tests."

Baden Coordinates Tests

The tests, being performed by a number of toxicology experts here, in New Jersey and in California, are being coordinated by Dr. Michael M. Baden, deputy chief medical examiner of New York City. Dr. Baden, a leading forensic pathologist, is also conducting the autopsies.

The five deaths were among 13 that figured in an inconclusive investigation into the Riverdell case in late 1966 by Guy W. Calissi, who was then the Bergen County Prosecutor. That investigation, which was never made public, was dropped after two weeks despite much conflicting evidence and unresolved questions.

Mr. Calissi's investigation, like that of Mr. Woodcock's, focused on whether a surgeon at Riverdell had used curare to kill patients of his colleagues while the patients were recovering in their rooms from operations. Eighteen vials of curare, most of them empty or nearly so, had been found in the surgeon's locker at Riverdell.

The drug, which is not normally present in the body, is often used to relax muscles during surgery, but it can be lethal if improperly used.

Wrongdoing Denied

The surgeon denied any wrongdoing during the investigation in 1966 and said that he used the curare in experiments on dying dogs at a medical school in another community. Because the surgeon, who has left Riverdell but who is associated with at least three other medical institutions in New Jersey, has not been charged with a crime, his name has been withheld by The New York Times, which first disclosed the investigation, and he has been referred to as Dr. X.

According to sources close to Mr. Woodcock's investigation, aides of the Bergen County Prosecutor began last week to take a statement from Dr. X.

But the surgeon's lawyer, who has asked not to be named in an effort to protect his client's identity, said yesterday that Dr. X had not appeared before Mr. Woodcock or his aides. Mr. Woodcock would neither confirm nor deny that Dr. X had given a deposition.

"This whole thing is a silly Frankenstein-monster movie," Dr. X's lawyer said. "I'll be amazed if all those chemists with their test tubes find anything. If they find what they should find, they won't find anything."

Other recent developments in the case include the following:

The New Jersey Board of Medical Examiners has greatly expanded its own inquiry into whether Dr. X's license should be suspended pending the outcome of Mr. Woodcock's investigation.

Detectives and assistant prosecutors in Mr. Woodcock's office have begun interviewing employees at Riverdell and other medical institutions where Dr. X was, or is, associated.

Officials at Riverdell who are now reviewing many post-surgical mortalities at the hospital in the early and mid-1960's are said to have discovered at least one other death that bears resemblance to the 13 that were called to Mr. Calissi's attention by the hospital in 1966. Many of the 13 deaths were sudden or unexpected, and followed respiratory arrests.

Of the three bodies that have been exhumed, two had autopsies performed at death; one had not. In one case, involving a 4-year old girl, no natural cause of death was found in 1966 — and none was found during the second autopsy.

The body was exceptionally well-preserved after 10 years because the coffin was watertight and airtight and the body had been well embalmed, Dr. Baden said. The pathologist is still examining tissues from the two other bodies that have been exhumed.

The two bodies that will be exhumed this week are those of Frank Biggs, a 59-year-old accountant, and Carl Rohrbeck, 73, the only patient among the 13 to die before undergoing surgery.