

Grand Jury Starts Taking Testimony in Case of Dr. X

NYTimes

By M. A. FARBER MAR 16 1976

Special to The New York Times

HACKENSACK, N. J., March 15—A Bergen County grand jury began taking testimony here today in the case of Dr. X, a New Jersey surgeon who is suspected of having murdered nine or more patients with curare at Riverdell Hospital in Oradell a decade ago.

At the same time, law enforcement sources said that curare, a potentially lethal drug that can paralyze breathing muscles, has been found in the second of five bodies exhumed in the new investigation of the case by Joseph C. Woodcock Jr., the Bergen County Prosecutor.

The New York Times reported last week that curare had been found in the tissues of the first body disinterred—that of Nancy Savino. The Savino child was 4 years old when she died suddenly and unexpectedly at the hospital on March 21, 1966. Her death was never explained medically.

The second body in which the presence of curare has been established and confirmed by medical scientists was that of Emma M. Arzt, a former Westwood librarian, who died at Riverdell a day after her gall bladder was removed on Sept. 22, 1966.

Mrs. Arzt, who was 70 years old, suffered a respiratory arrest shortly before her death, which was initially attributed to acute circulatory failure due to a heart attack. A cardiogram taken five hours before she died showed no problems with her heart.

Mrs. Arzt's death was one of 13 "unexplained or unusual" deaths reviewed in 1966 by Guy W. Calissi, then the Bergen County Prosecutor. For reasons that are still unclear, Mr. Calissi's investigation was dropped after two weeks, without a presentation to a grand jury. During the original investiga-

Continued on Page 63, Column 1

Continued From Page 1, Col. 4

tion, 18 vials of curare, most of them empty or nearly so, were found in Dr. X's locker at Riverdell after it was opened by Dr. Stanley Harris, another surgeon at the hospital, who suspected Dr. X of "performing these deaths." Many of the 13 persons had been patients of Dr. Harris; none were operated on by Dr. X.

Dr. Harris, sources said, was one of at least two witnesses who testified today before the grand jury, which is expected to sit for as much as a month. Essentially there are two kinds of grand juries—investigative grand juries and grand juries from which an indictment is sought by a prosecutor. It could not be learned yesterday which type of grand jury this was.

Dr. Harris, sources said, was one of at least two witnesses who testified today before the grand jury, which is expected to sit for as much as a month.

Dr. Harris could not be reached today for comment.

Another witness, according to sources, was Dr. Michael M. Baden, deputy chief medical examiner of New York City. Dr. Baden is leading one of two teams of medical scientists in four states—York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Califor-

nia—who are studying the exhumed bodies for evidence of curare.

Dr. Baden would neither confirm nor deny today that he had appeared before the grand jury here.

At the outset of Mr. Woodcock's investigation two months ago—an investigation prompted by an extensive inquiry by The Times into the suspicious deaths—Dr. Baden advised Mr. Woodcock that at least nine of the 13 deaths were "not explainable by natural disease processes or the stated causes of death" and were consistent with death by a drug such as curare. At that stage the exhumations were ordered.

Dr. X, who has been interviewed by Mr. Woodcock twice in the last five weeks, has denied any wrongdoing in the Riverdell matter.

He testified before Mr. Calissi in 1966 that he had been using curare in experiments with "dying dogs" at a medical school in New Jersey, about 20 miles from the small osteopathic hospital in Oradell. But his account of his research on dogs—he himself said that no one had ever seen him do the actual experiments—has never been corroborated. And employees of the medical school's animal quarters, where Dr. X

said he had conducted the research at night, have sworn that they never saw any "dying dogs" on which the surgeon could have worked.

Between Sept. 21, 1965, and Sept. 28, 1966—roughly the period in which the "unusual or unexplained" deaths occurred—Dr. X bought 24 10-cubic-centimeter vials of curare from a surgical supply company in northern New Jersey. As little as five to six cubic centimeters of the standard solution of curare can cause death in the absence of artificial respiration.

Dr. Harris testified in 1966 that his suspicions about Dr. X were aroused, in part, because Dr. X had frequently ministered to Dr. Harris's patients before they died or had been present in the hospital when death occurred, even at what some doctors said were odd hours for Dr. X.

In the case of Mrs. Arzt, the hospital chart shows that Dr. X made an attempt to revive her breathing after she had a respiratory arrest. The chart does not indicate that he was in the patient's room prior to that time.

Fatty Tumor Remove

In addition to removing her diseased gall bladder on Sept. 22, 1966, Dr. Harris extracted a lipoma, or fatty tumor, from Mrs. Arzt's head. The operation was described by Riverdell doctors in 1966 as "uneventful" and "uncomplicated."

According to the hospital chart, Mrs. Arzt had a fairly comfortable night and the next morning she was given a bath. As in all the 13 cases, an intravenous feeding tube was in operation.

About 8 A.M. on Sept. 23, the patient had a "red discharge" around the dressing

from her operation, and the dressing was reinforced. Not long thereafter, Mrs. Arzt became "cyanotic [blue] and ceased breathing," the chart states. Apparently responding to an emergency call for help, Dr. X gave Mrs. Arzt artificial respiration and a heart massage.

Mrs. Arzt was then hooked up to a perform the breathing function for new machine that would and she subsequently recovered the ability to breathe herself. Dr. Harris and another doctor treated her intermittently. At 2 P.M., however, she began perspiring heavily and stopped breathing. Ten minutes later she was pronounced dead.

The cardiogram, which was negative, was done on Mrs. Arzt after her first respiratory arrest.

Dr. X, in addition to being under investigation by Mr. Woodcock, is also being investigated by the New Jersey State Board of Medical Examiners, which licenses physicians. The surgeon, who resigned from Riverdell shortly after the first investigation of the case, still teaches and operates in New Jersey.