

# Suspicious About Doctor Brought Curare Inquiry

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Ten years ago, in the fall of 1966, a worried young doctor just out of medical school peered into a locker in a room of Riverdell Hospital, a small osteopathic center in Oradell, N.J., where he had recently begun practicing, and saw 18 empty vials.

The labels on them read "Tubocurarine" and "Tubarine," both brand names for purified curare.

The young doctor, Stanley Harris, had been suspicious of an older colleague, the man whose belongings were in the locker, because several of the younger man's patients had died suddenly of respiratory arrest and paralysis of the respiratory muscles — conditions consistent with those induced by injections of curare—after they were treated by the older doctor.

The young doctor's suspicions and subsequent discovery generated an investigation by the Bergen County prosecutor's office into 13 questionable deaths in the small hospital. But the investigation faltered and lay dormant until last January, when The New York Times reported the findings of its inquiry into the deaths and the practices of the older doctor.

## It Was 'Dr. X'

He was referred to only as "Dr. X," until the morning of March 7, when The Times, citing court records, identified him as Dr. Mario Jascavich, the former chief surgeon at Riverdell. Yesterday, Dr. Jascavich, a 48-year-old Argentine immigrant, was indicted for five alleged murders at Riverdell after a labyrinthine investigation that included exhumations of bodies, sophisticated testing of dead and decomposed body tissue for traces of injected curare, the grinding up of vital organs for testing with curare-detecting dyes, and such mundane investigative techniques as fingerprinting, the taking of dental impressions and X-rays.

The 10-year inquiry into Dr. Jascavich's actions at Riverdell began when the hospital's board of directors, after listening to Dr. Harris, asked Guy W. Calissi, then the Bergen County Prosecutor, to investigate their chief surgeon, for deaths they considered "unusual or unexplained." Dr. Jascavich denied any wrongdoing and protested that he was being "framed," perhaps by other doctors. However, he did say that he had been experimenting with curare on dying dogs.

The investigation turned up the fact that Dr. Jascavich had bought—between September, 1965 and September, 1966—24 10-cubic-centimeter vials of curare from a surgical supply company across the street from his office.

The 1966 investigation bogged down inexplicably, then was dropped in two weeks without any presentation to the sitting Bergen County grand jury. But three months later a toxicologist's report on the

tissue of one of those whose death was unexplained, a 36-year-old woman, Eileen Shaw, suggested that curare might be present in the tissue and that "the chemical findings should be considered suspicious without definite positive or negative results."

However, this finding was dropped into the by then inactive file.

## File Sent to Warehouse

The file was sent to a Bergen County warehouse, where it lay for almost a decade, until someone who had heard of the case told The Times of it. The Times's investigation led to a reopening of the case by the current County Prosecutor, Joseph G. Woodcock Jr. Mr. Woodcock was also told by Dr. Michael M. Baden, a leading forensic pathologist, that nine of the "unexplained" deaths were "not explainable by natural disease processes or the stated causes of death" and were consistent with death by a fast-acting drug such as curare.

Very quickly, exhumations, autopsies and reautopsies were ordered by Mr. Woodcock. The first of these was on the body of 4-year-old Nancy Savino, who died in Riverdell in March 1966.

Investigators next exhumed the body of Margaret Henderson, 26, who died, it was said initially, of hepatitis. Later, it was reported that there was "no clear indication" of the cause of her death.

Next came Frank Biggs, 59, who was listed as having died in August 1966 of a heart attack, and Carl Rohrbeck, 73, who died in December 1965 before scheduled hernial surgery. The fifth was Mrs. Shaw.

## Medical Detectives

Their body tissues were turned over to teams of medical detectives. Their task was complicated by the fact that, even if curare had been present at the times of death, it might have undergone chemical change, or be undetectable because of embalming fluids or substances in the earth that could interfere with the tests. They were worried they might get false or inconclusive results. They used techniques that were not available a decade ago for the first autopsies.

On March 6, the presence of curare was reported in Nancy Savino's body.

Ten days later, a Bergen County Grand Jury began hearing testimony in the case, even as it was disclosed that curare had been found in still another exhumed body, that of Emma Arzt, a 70-year-old librarian who died in September 1966, as well as in the tissues of Mr. Biggs and Mrs. Henderson.

Mr. Woodcock then said he planned to seek an indictment. Yesterday that indictment was returned with four more, and no "Doctor X" finds himself accused of being a multiple murderer.