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Coroners-Kopechne

ST. PAUL, Minn. AP - Dr. Donald R. Mills, who signed Mary Jo Kopechne's death certificate without recommending an autopsy, is still confident "an autopsy, if it had been performed, would not have altered the end result."

Mills, of Edgartown, Mass., defended his decision not to request an autopsy and not to interview Sen Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., in whose car Miss Kopechne died, during a questioning period Friday at the International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners meeting.

Miss Kopechne's death was attributed by Mills to accidental drowning.

Miss Kopechne, a Kennedy campaign worker died in July 1969 when the car went off a bridge on Chappaquiddick Island in Massachusetts.

Mills said he had just sent a woman in labor to a hospital and had a busy day of appointments ahead of him. He also said there was no immediate connection between Miss Kopechne and the senator.

Mills said he found a fully dressed, "very attractive" blonde girl whose clothing was "all buttoned and in place" with obvious signs of having died by drowning. There were no indications of some other cause of death other than drowning, Mills said.

There is large expense for an autopsy since a pathologist must come from Boston to Edgartown, he said.

Mills said he examines several drowning victims each year and never orders an autopsy in an obvious drowning case.

A spokesman for the district attorney's office agreed with him that an autopsy wasn't necessary, Mills said.

Mills was asked how he could have signed a death certificate of accidental drowning without doing more than examining her body. He said the condition of the body and the finding of an overturned car in a pond near a hazardous bridge indicated accidental drowning.

H0726ped aug. 29