

Guy Wright

Coroner's Bitter Pill

Last March, when Dr. Thomas T. Noguchi was dismissed as coroner of Los Angeles, one of the charges immediately leveled against him was that he gobbled Dex-amyl, a pep pill.

How was the drug identified? By laboratory test.

When was the lab report completed? Not until May 14, just two days before his hearing contesting the dismissal began.

And the pill used for the lab test had never been in Dr. Noguchi's possession.

After his dismissal one of his accusers, a doctor on his staff, prepared a sample of 40 assorted pills. From that sample two other accusers, one a doctor, one a layman, picked out a green-and-white pill that "looked like" those they said they'd seen Dr. Noguchi take.

This was the pill used in the lab tests to "prove" the coroner stayed high on Dex-amyl.

All this was brought out in cross-examination by his attorney, Godfrey Isaac.

Other members of Noguchi's staff, people who saw him several times a day, testified they never saw him take pills or display pill symptoms.

Such was the flimsy character of the case against Dr. Noguchi — a case that at last has seen the coroner exonerated and restored to his job.

The charges were so grotesque they received national headlines. But at the hearing before the Civil Service Commission they shriveled.

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WHAT FINALLY emerged was a witch's brew of racial prejudice, political backbiting and the griping of disgruntled subordinates

The charge that he prayed for airplane crashes and other disasters shrank to warnings during budget battles of what could happen in a metropolis like Los Angeles.

The charge that he "hoped" Robert F. Kennedy would die shrank to he "knew" he would die.

The charge that he botched the Kennedy autopsy was withdrawn and the prosecution conceded he did a "superior" job.

The charge that he wished Mayor Yorty's helicopter would crash was thrown out entirely.

The "terrible knife" he carried turned out to be a standard surgeon's instrument.

He was accused of "working his chauffeur to death" (the man died as the hearing started) by making him put in 486 hours of overtime last year...

The defense proved the chauffeur received 486 hours of compensatory time off and died of "a terminal illness." What's more, Noguchi had cleared away a civil service roadblock that barred the man's promotion.

Noguchi himself had only recently won promotion to coroner. He was still on six-month probation when he performed the Kennedy autopsy.

One of the charges was that he couldn't handle the work load, letting a backlog of 500 cases develop.

The defense replied this wasn't unusual in a city with 1000 deaths a month. Two major plane crashes and a flu epidemic had swollen the toll. Yet at the time of his dismissal he had cut the backlog to 270.

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THE TESTIMONY about the work load was colored by Dr. Noguchi's budgetary battle with L. N. Hollinger, the chief administrative officer of the county.

The coroner won the battle, but it was Hollinger who later brought the charges against him.

"We accepted the word of one man" in dismissing Dr. Noguchi, testified County Supervisor Kenneth Hahn. He meant Hollinger.

Hahn said Hollinger claimed he had sworn statements from witnesses to back up the charges — charges that made headlines coast to coast.

Hollinger admitted on the witness stand that sworn statements didn't exist at the time he talked to Hahn.

Afterward, however, he ordered his underlings to dig up some evidence with the help of six disgruntled members of the coroner's staff.

The pep pill lab test was part of the result.

Tomorrow: Dr. Noguchi's gamble.