

BIOCHEMIST BACKS COPPOLINO'S CASE

Defense Witness Challenges
State on Lethal Drug

By HOMER BIGART

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NAPLES, Fla., April 20 — The defense in the murder trial of Dr. Carl A. Coppolino called as its first witness today a biochemist who disputed the state's contention that Mrs. Carmela Coppolino was slain in 1965 by an injection of a paralyzing drug.

The witness, Dr. John Crispin Smith of Montefiore Hospital in New York, said he could not find enough choline, a component of the drug, near the site of an injection-needle puncture on Mrs. Coppolino to be consistent with a lethal dose of succinylcholine.

But under cross-examination Dr. Smith admitted he had not searched for the drug's other component, succinic acid. It was the detection of a significant quantity of succinic acid in the brain tissues of Mrs. Coppolino that led Dr. Milton Helpert, Chief Medical Examiner of New York, to conclude she had been murdered.

Injections in Rats

Dr. Smith said he had injected rats with killing doses of succinylcholine to determine how the drug was distributed in the body at death. He found only minute percentages of the succinic acid in the rats' brains he testified, and his supported his belief that something called a "blood brain barrier" prevents the composition from entering their brain.

Assistant Prosecutor William Strobe derided that he called Dr. Smith's "rat tests."

He got Dr. Smith to concede that there might be important variations in factors effecting distribution of the drug in rats as against humans.

He brought out that all Dr. Smith's opinions were based on choline in an embalmed body was useless by itself as a basis for determining the presence or the absence of the lethal drug.

Late in this morning's session Dr. Coppolino complained of chest pains. His lawyer, F. Lee Bailey, went to the bench conferred with Judge Lynn Silvertooth. The judge then ordered a luncheon recess.

Dr. Coppolino has been accused by the state of having feigned a heart condition since 1962 when he applied for disability payments totaling \$22,000 a year. His present wife, Mary Gibson Coppolino, who



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BECOMES ILL IN COURT: Dr. Carl A. Coppolino, on trial for murder of his first wife, Carmela, is assisted from court in Naples, Fla. With him are his second wife, Mary, left, and Terri Lee Plaut, an aide to Dr. Coppolino's attorney, F. Lee Bailey.

sat near him in court today, said she had noticed him putting his hand to his head, that his carotid artery seemed tense and that he was sweating.

After the luncheon recess Dr. Coppolino said he felt fine. Instead of using the elevator he walked up the stairs to the second-floor courtroom.

From his experiments on rats, Dr. Smith testified, he concluded that 76 per cent of a dose of succinylcholine would remain near the injection site.

Choline Amounts Vary

He found abnormally high quantities of choline in the brain and buttocks of Mrs. Coppolino, he said. He attributed this to the effect of formaldehyde used in the embalming.

The state had agreed that formaldehyde frees choline normally bound to other substances in the body, and that was why the amount of choline was variable in embalmed cases.

There was slightly more choline in the left buttock near

the injection site than on the right buttock, Dr. Smith testified. He could not account for this, he said, but suggested it was due to a difference in preservation.

In any case, he insisted, it was not nearly enough to prove an injection of succinylcholine.

Last week, a state witness, Dr. Bert La Du Jr., chairman of the department of pharmacology at New York University, said he had found a significant amount of elements of the drug in flesh near the needle track.

The material Dr. La Du found had "the same properties" as succinylmonocholine, which is what succinylcholine becomes after it is taken into the body.

On cross-examination, Dr. Smith said he did not quarrel with this finding.

This morning, Mr. Bailey succeeded in preventing testimony by Carmela Coppolino's father, Dr. Carmelo A. Musetto, that his daughter was in perfect health at the time of her death.