

SFChronicle
Family of
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LSD Victim
To Sue CIA

By Seymour M. Hersh
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The family of an Army researcher who committed suicide in 1953 after being made an unwitting participant in a Central Intelligence Agency drug experiment said yesterday that they plan to sue the agency for his "wrongful death."

In an interview at their home, Alice W. Olson and her three children said they first learned the circumstances of the death after the Rockefeller Commission disclosed last month that CIA files showed one suicide had stemmed from a 10-year agency program of administering the drug LSD to unsuspecting subjects.

The commission's report did not identify the victim, who worked for the Army, but his family identified him yesterday as Frank R. Olson. Later, David W. Belin, director of Vice President Nelson Rockefeller's panel looking into CIA activities, confirmed that Olson had been the victim.

"I'm very angry at the CIA because they let us grow up thinking our father had 'inexplicably' committed suicide," said Eric W. Olson, 30, the eldest son who is now a Harvard graduate student.

After weeks of discussions, Olson said, the family decided to tell its story because "we wanted to get the

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NYT filed CIA (d); later clippings will be filed there.

FAMILY OF LSD VICTIM

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story out so our father's friends and colleagues — and also our friends — could know what the CIA has done."

Until last month, the family members said, all they had been told about Olson's death was that he "jumped or fell" to his death on Nov. 28, 1953, from the tenth floor of the Hotel Statler in New York City.

At no time since then, Mrs. Olson said, did the CIA contact her to explain the true circumstances of her husband's death.

"I was stunned" after hearing of the CIA's experiment on her husband, Mrs. Olson said. "It never occurred to me that there could be foul play."

William E. Colby, Director of Central Intelligence, could not be reached immediately for comment, and a spokesman for the agency declined to comment on the authenticity of the suicide report.

In a joint statement that will be made at a news conference today, the family related how Olson, then a 43-year-old high-level civilian biological warfare researcher at nearby Fort Detrick, suddenly began showing symptoms of anxiety and became "uncharacteristically withdrawn" following a week-long work conference.

Fort Detrick served as the Army's secret research base for biological warfare from

1943 until it was converted to a cancer research facility in the early 1970s. The family said that Olson, who held a Ph.D in biochemistry from the University of Wisconsin, did research on "the most lethal micro-organisms known to humanity, those that transmit diseases such as bubonic plague."

The conference was one of a series that Olson and his colleagues held in the "special operations" division of Fort Detrick with CIA personnel, apparently to discuss CIA biological warfare research needs.

Not until publication of the Rockefeller Commission report and subsequent discussions with one of Olson's former colleagues, the family statement said, "did we learn that Frank Olson had, without his knowledge or consent, been given LSD by two CIA employees during the research meeting."

"Shortly after dinner one evening during the meeting Frank Olson and four special operations divisions scientists were told that they had been given lysergic acid diethylamide and that their reactions would be observed. We do not know what occurred during the remainder of this meeting."

Olson continued to exhibit signs of imbalance at work the next week, the family statement continued, and a colleague — who was not identified by name — called two CIA liaison men and

made plans to fly the scientist to New York to see a psychiatrist, Dr. Harold A. Abramson, who held appropriate security clearances.

A few days later, the statement said, the family was told of Frank Olson's death.

The family statement added, "an employee of the Central Intelligence Agency had been with Frank Olson in his hotel room the night he died. Olson's widow was later told that her husband's escort had awakened about 1:30 a.m. to see Olson going at a full run toward the window. He said he saw Olson go through both the closed window and drawn shade."

"We are agonized over the question of what kind of horrid 'nightmare' or 'event' could have driven him to hurl himself at a full run out of a tenth-story window," the statement said, "and how this 'suicidal nervous breakdown' — the term we have always used — could have developed so suddenly, so devoid of connection to anything we or his friends had known of him."

The family was notified shortly after the death that they would be paid compensation because the death was the result of a work-related accident.

For the next 22 years, the family recalled in the interview, the Olsons were unsure whether to call their father's death a "suicide."

There was some shame, too, over their father's death, the children recalled.

"When friends would ask 'how did your daddy die?' — that's always been a tough one," said Lisa W. Hayward, the 29-year-old married daughter.

"I used to say 'he died of a concussion,'" Nills W. Olson, now a 26-year-old dental student at the University of Maryland, added.

In their statement, the family angrily described the impact of the recent revelations.

"Since 1953, we have struggled to understand Frank Olson's death as an inexplicable 'suicide.' At the time he died, Frank Olson's wife was 38 years old, his eldest son was nine years old, his daughter seven, and his youngest son five. Now, 22 years later, we learn that this death was the result of CIA negligence and illegality on a scale difficult to contemplate.

"Suddenly we learn that Alice Olson's being left in early adulthood to raise a family alone, her children left to grow up without a father — we learn that these deprivations were not necessary. And we suddenly learn

that for 22 years we were lied to, led to believe that Frank Olson had a fatal nervous breakdown. Thus Frank Olson's children grew up under a double shadow, the shadow of their father's suicide and the shadowy inexplicability of that act."

Eric Olson added in the interview that the family's decision to file a lawsuit was based not only on a desire to collect monetary damages, but because "we think there's more information involved in this."

"It's also a way of holding the CIA publicly accountable for what they did," he said.

Along with more information about the CIA's decision to experiment on Olson, the family also said it would seek further facts about the role of Dr. Abramson, the New York psychiatrist, who had "several long sessions" with Olson.