

NYTimes <sup>21A</sup> APR 21 1976

# Howard Hughes at the End: Contradictions in Accounts

The following article was written by Nicholas M. Horrock and is based on reporting by him and Lawrence K. Altman, John M. Croudson and James P. Sterba.

Contradictory accounts about the final days and illness of Howard R. Hughes have emerged from interviews and public statements about the reclusive billionaire's recent death.

Some evidence, including statements by doctors who treated the 70-year-old Mr. Hughes and by present and former associates, suggests that he resisted or refused treatment that could have prolonged his life.

But beyond that, the accounts given by two of Mr. Hughes's doctors, and the statements made to the Mexican Federal Police by his aides, con-

flict in several instances about his condition in his final days.

The possible significance of these conflicts is not clear. But the question of whether Mr. Hughes was competent to manage his affairs during the last stages of his life, or was under the influence of others, could become important if a court battle develops over the disposition of Mr. Hughes's \$1.5 billion estate.

The following are the inconsistencies in the accounts of the last days of Mr. Hughes:

Dr. Victor Emanuel Montemayor, a Mexican physician summoned to examine Mr. Hughes in Acapulco early on the morning of April 5, said that one of Mr. Hughes's doctors told him that Mr. Hughes had a "convulsion" on Friday, April 2, and that he had been in a coma since that time. "I have the impression that it was a brain hemorrhage that started off the entire problem," Dr. Montemayor said in an interview. "The coma was very deep and there was no explanation because the kidney analysis was practically normal. On Friday he had a violent and sudden shock, which I imagine was the stroke probably through a brain hemorrhage. Immediately he entered into a coma."

Dr. Lawrence Chaffin, a Hughes doctor who was in attendance when the industrialist died, said that when he saw Mr. Hughes on April 4 the pa-

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tient was not in a coma; in fact, he said, Mr. Hughes was partly conscious and he found no evidence of a stroke.

Dr. Chaffin said that a blood-urea-nitrogen test he ordered late on April 4 showed that Mr. Hughes was suffering from a kidney ailment and this was later noted as the cause of death. But Dr. Montemayor, reading the same test results, said, "The blood test was good, the urine test was good, all the analyses taken after he entered into coma, were relatively normal."

Dr. Chaffin said that Mr. Hughes fell out of bed on March 1 in Acapulco and severed a half-inch tumor on his scalp, which left a fresh scar noted in the autopsy. Clarence A. Waldron, one of Mr. Hughes's aides, told the Mexican Federal Police that Mr. Hughes had severed the tumor when he fell out of a chair in Freeport, Bahamas.

For nearly two weeks before his death, Mr. Hughes was treated by Dr. Norman Crane of Los Angeles, one of three physicians who shared responsibility for his care. Dr. Crane did not accompany Mr. Hughes when he flew to Houston on April 5.

### Chronic Kidney Ailment

Dr. Chaffin said that he did not establish that Mr. Hughes was suffering from a chronic kidney ailment until a little over 13 hours before the time of death. Subsequently an autopsy in Houston established that Mr. Hughes had died of kidney failure.

In an extensive interview with The New York Times, Dr. Chaffin, an 83-year-old surgeon who had treated Mr. Hughes since 1932, acknowledged that such an ailment was readily identifiable and treatable. He said the fact that Mr. Hughes was suffering kidney damage might have eluded his doctors because he refused to submit to the blood and urine tests necessary to identify it.

Dr. Chaffin said he had treated Mr. Hughes's "surgically related" medical problems on a consultant basis and that the billionaire recluse's day-to-day care was handled by three physicians. But, Dr. Chaffin said, on the night of April 4 Mr. Hughes's medical condition was "deteriorating rapidly" so he ordered blood and urine tests without the patient's permission.

He said Mr. Hughes was only partly conscious during this period.

Dr. Chaffin says he was with Mr. Hughes continuously from Dec. 23, 1975 until his death on April 5. He described the last months of Mr. Hughes's life in an interview in Los Angeles, which was part of an inquiry by Times reporters in Houston, Salt Lake City, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Acapulco and Miami.

### Virtually Bedridden

Dr. Chaffin said that since Mr. Hughes broke his hip in London in 1972, he had been virtually bedridden and increasingly dependent upon the group of aides and medical men around him.

Most of the men closest to Mr. Hughes in his last days had been selected for the job, directly or indirectly, by Frank William Gay, the executive vice president and director of the Summa Corporation, Mr. Hughes's holding company.

Mr. Gay is a Mormon; indeed, a significant number of men in the senior echelon at Summa and around Mr. Hughes were members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

There were, in effect, two circles of companions to Mr. Hughes.

The inner circle, according to Summa sources, consisted of Lavar Myler and Howard Eckersley, both of Salt Lake City, George Francom, of Las Vegas, Clarence A. Waldron and John Holmes of Los Angeles.

The outer circle included Eric E. Bundy and Clyde B. Crow of Los Angeles and Roy Crawford of Burbank. Despite repeated visits to their homes, as well as telephone calls and requests through the Summa Corporation none of them would agree to an on-the-record interview.

### Rotation of Doctors

In effect the responsibility for Mr. Hughes's medical care seemed relegated to this outer circle. Dr. Chaffin said that he could get permission to examine Mr. Hughes by going through an aide. He said he did not believe that the other doctors had much better access.

Mr. Hughes was regularly treated by three physicians who rotated the responsibility of being on standby wherever Mr. Hughes chose to live. Dr. Norman Crane, 71, a Los Angeles internist and a graduate of the Johns Hopkins Medical School, had treated Mr. Hughes for nearly a decade.

Dr. Crane had "inherited" Mr. Hughes as a patient, Dr. Chaffin said, from his medical colleague Dr. Vernon Mason, who treated the industrialist for many years and who died in the mid-1960's.

Dr. Crane was on standby duty during Mr. Hughes's last two weeks in Acapulco and his view of Mr. Hughes's medical condition, Dr. Chaffin said, would be informative. However, repeated efforts to reach Dr. Crane, through his office and through relatives in Stockton, Calif., failed.

Dr. Wilbur S. Thain, a general practitioner from Logan, Utah, was also on the Hughes medical



staff. For several years he had treated Mr. Hughes while also conducting a busy family medical practice in Logan. But early in 1975, according to medical associates, he gave up his practice to devote more time to Mr. Hughes. Dr. Thain is Mr. Gay's brother-in-law.

**Dr. Homer C. Clark** of Salt Lake City has been associated with Mr. Hughes's care since 1970. It was Dr. Clark's laboratory in Salt Lake City that supplies blood for Mr. Hughes's transfusions in a medical crisis in the summer of 1970. Dr. Clark is the brother of Rand Clark, an executive assistant to Mr. Gay at the Summa Corporation.

#### Blood for Transfusions

Last Dec. 23 Dr. Chaffin was summoned to Freeport. He found Mr. Hughes much weaker than he had been in August, he said. Though called to treat Mr. Hughes, Dr. Chaffin says he was seldom asked to see his patient. From the day he arrived until Mr. Hughes died, Dr. Chaffin said, he had only three "official visits" — visits in which he talked to and treated Mr. Hughes.

"I saw him almost daily," the doctor adds, "by going in and watching him when he was asleep."

In early February of this year, the Hughes party moved to Acapulco, according to services there, and sealed off the top floor of the luxurious Princess Hotel. Mr. Hughes stayed in a darkened room—its windows sealed by plywood and black curtains—where he slowly succumbed to kidney disease.

Dr. Chaffin said he and the other doctors were concerned about Mr. Hughes's weight loss in Acapulco. But at no time before April 4, Dr. Chaffin said, does he recall being convinced that Mr. Hughes had a kidney ailment or discussing it with the other doctors. Dr. Chaffin said he did not know when, before April 4, Mr. Hughes might have had the test for a kidney ailment.

#### 'Willful' Patient

He described Mr. Hughes as a "willful" and difficult patient who would not submit to medical procedures easily and who had had dramatic weight losses earlier because he would not follow a proper diet. During his Las Vegas sojourn, according to the doctor, Mr. Hughes suffered from anemia and malnutrition brought on by eating only candy bars, other sweets and drinking milk.

Now, in retrospect, Dr. Chaffin says, "You could ask, why in God's name wasn't something done for him? But with Howard Hughes you just couldn't do things." Failure to permit proper tests, he said, "was entirely his own fault because he would not allow it. He made his own decisions about everything."

On March 1, Dr. Chaffin recalled, Mr. Hughes fell from his bed and struck his head on a bed table, shearing off a half-inch tumor. The accident gave the doctor a chance to test the tissue, and he said he had found the tumor benign.

On March 5, Dr. Chaffin said, Mr. Hughes was "lucid, in control of his faculties" and inquired of Dr. Chaffin about several doctors and nurses who had treated him during an airplane crash in 1946.

Dr. Chaffin said on April 4 an aide to Mr. Hughes sum-

moned him to the darkened room because he was "concerned" about Mr. Hughes's condition. Dr. Chaffin said he had found the patient breathing fast, only semiconscious and "deteriorating rapidly."

Dr. Chaffin said he took the initiative to order blood and urine tests. He said that Dr. Crane drew the blood for the tests. At midnight, the results came in, Dr. Chaffin said, and confirmed his suspicion that Mr. Hughes had a kidney ailment.

Dr. Chaffin said he had realized that if they hospitalized Mr. Hughes in Mexico they would need a local physician because neither he nor Dr. Crane were licensed to practice outside the United States. Dr. Chaffin said he had called in Dr. Montemayor, whose name he had received from a patient.

The Mexican doctor said he arrived at 6 A.M. on April 5, and found a nude, emaciated man with bed sores who was covered by a pastel sheet. His hair was long but not "hippie length" and his beard was trimmed to about an inch and a half, according to the doctor.

Dr. Montemayor looked at the results of the blood and urine tests and found them both "good." He said that in his opinion the tests could not account for the coma in which he found Mr. Hughes.

Dr. Montemayor said that Mr. Hughes's doctors had told him that on the previous Friday, April 2, "he had a violent and sudden shock, which I imagine was the stroke probably through a brain hemorrhage." Dr. Chaffin said he never told Dr. Montemayor that Mr. Hughes had had a stroke, but he said that Dr. Crane had a discussion with Dr. Montemayor out of his earshot.

Of accounts about long, curling finger nails, Dr. Montemayor said: "I saw his hands and his nails didn't attract my attention. He was well looked after and clean." Bed sores are to be expected in such cases.

#### Houston Is Chosen

Local hospitalization was ruled out by the three doctors because the hospitals lacked sufficiently sophisticated equipment and personnel to handle such a case. Houston was chosen as the nearest city with adequate facilities.

Summa officials said an effort was made to charter a plane in Acapulco but that none was available.

Meanwhile, Summa had leased a small four to six passenger Lear 24B jet to pick up Dr. Thain, who had been vacationing in Freeport in the Bahamas, and take him to Acapulco. The plane arrived at 8:05 A.M., but it was three hours before the Hughes party could decide who would accompany the billionaire to Houston.

It was finally agreed that George Francom and Dr. Crane would take a commercial flight to Los Angeles. Three aides were left behind to clean up matters in Mexico.

The plane bearing Mr. Hughes left shortly after 11 A.M. for Houston. Dr. Chaffin said Mr. Hughes was alive when the plane took off. According to the information Dr. Thain later gave to Houston medical officials, Mr. Hughes died at 1:27 P.M., about 23 minutes before the aircraft's scheduled arrival.

Dr. Chaffin said he did not record the time, but recalled looking out of the window at

the time and noting that the plane had just passed from over the Gulf of Mexico across the shoreline to Brownsville, Tex. This is a crucial point, he said, because of the "enormous red tape" and "difficulties" that would have arisen if Mr. Hughes had died in Mexico.

Legal experts also pointed out that the autopsy and medical investigation would have been conducted by the Mexican authorities.

The Houston autopsy has not been made public. At a news conference on April 6, Dr. Henry D. McIntosh, the attending physician at Methodist Hospital in Houston, said he would not comment on whether Mr. Hughes's physicians had underestimated his physical durability, adding, "I would not want to even speculate in this area because I don't know. I really don't know. A man himself has to decide if he needs some help, and beyond that I just don't know."

On April 8, the Houston City Bureau of Vital Statistics received a death certificate on Howard R. Hughes. It was signed by Dr. Jack L. Titus, who performed the autopsy and is the hospital's chief of pathology. It listed "chronic renal failure" as the immediate cause of death.

Another section of the certificate is reserved for listing "other significant contributing factors." The section was left

blank. If Mr. Hughes had had a stroke, head wound, or any other problem that contributed to his death, Dr. Titus was obliged to record them in this section, according to an official of the bureau.

In the last few hours of Howard Hughes's life, his aides functioned in the world of secrecy to which he had so well conditioned them. Kenneth Wright, director of the Hughes Medical Foundation quietly called Dr. McIntosh to warn him that Mr. Hughes was coming and to arrange the secret admission of "J.T. Conover," according to Dr. McIntosh.

In an interview, Dr. Montemayor wondered why Mr. Hughes had not been hospitalized sooner and said that he had asked the Hughes doctors. "They didn't give me an adequate explanation," he said. "This man was apparently unable to return to the United States for reasons I did not know."

Howard Robard Hughes, the man who built an empire on secrecy, dealing with billions of Government dollars through a corporation that had to report to no one publicly, carried that secrecy and corporate discipline to and beyond his death.

Throughout the corporate empire, his employees still refuse to speak of Mr. Hughes, as if no one is quite certain he is really dead and he might reappear to retaliate against those who disclose his secrets.