

COPPOLINO TRIAL TOLD OF DRUG FIND

Helpern and Aide Say Acid
Showed Up in Wife's Body

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NAPLES, Fla., April 12—Two of the country's leading medical examiners testified today that they found traces of a usually undetectable drug in the body of Mrs. Carmela Coppolino. Dr. Carl A. Coppolino, who was her husband, is on trial on a charge of having murdered her.

Dr. Milton Halpern, chief medical examiner of New York, and the director of his toxicological laboratory, Dr. Charles Joseph Umberger, said they found succinic acid in the brain and liver of Mrs. Coppolino, who died suddenly at the age of 32 on Aug. 28, 1965, in the Coppolino home on Longboat Key, off Sarasota.

Succinic acid is a component of succinylcholine, a drug frequently used by anesthesiologists to relax a patient's muscles during an operation. The handsome 34-year-old Dr. Coppolino was an anesthesiologist before a heart ailment forced him to retire in 1963.

The state contends that he acquired six bottles of succinylcholine a month before his wife's death and that he killed her by injecting her with an overdose of the drug.

Needle Wound Cited

Dr. Halpern testified that his autopsy on Mrs. Coppolino, conducted Dec. 17, 1965, revealed a small wound, apparently made by a needle in the woman's left buttock. The state asserts that, from the location of the wound and the track of the needle, Mrs. Coppolino could not have made the injection herself.

The autopsy showed no other abnormalities, Dr. Halpern said. The heart was found to have been completely normal and the woman could not have died of a coronary occlusion, he told the court. Neighbors of Dr. Coppolino testified yesterday that the doctor told them his wife died of a massive coronary occlusion.

Dr. Halpern was allowed to testify only after a strenuous battle by defense counsel F. Lee Bailey to keep him off the stand.

It was Mr. Bailey's contention that Dr. Halpern's report of the autopsy was based on "hearsay evidence" because the toxicological findings were not made by Dr. Halpern but by Dr. Umberger. Moreover, the analytical methods by which the presence of succinic acid was uncovered were experimental, Mr. Bailey insisted.

Amounts of Drugs Questioned
He called the testimony of Dr. Halpern "worthless" unless Dr. Umberger could first prove to the jury "with reasonable medical certainty" that succinic acid and choline were present in amounts sufficient to kill Mrs. Coppolino.

Mr. Bailey said he would de-

mand a mistrial unless Dr. Umberger testified first. And he asked Judge Lynn Silvertooth to hold a hearing with the jury excluded to determine whether any of Dr. Halpern's testimony would be admissible.

Judge Silvertooth retired for 40 minutes to consider the defense motions. Then he ruled for the state. But in allowing Dr. Halpern to testify he demanded assurance from prosecutor Frank Schaub that Dr. Umberger and other chemists who were relied on by Dr. Halpern would be produced as witnesses.

The judge warned Mr. Schaub that if he failed to produce these witnesses "the court will terminate the trial at that time."

Mr. Halpern, the state's most formidable witness, is a tall, gentle-looking, stooped-shouldered man who testified that during his 36 years in the medical examiner's office he had personally performed "16,000 to 18,000 autopsies" and participated in at least 48,000 more.

Color Slides Shown

In meticulous detail he described, with the aid of color slides flashed upon the courtroom wall, how he performed the autopsy on Mrs. Coppolino.

Mr. Halpern said that she had been dead about three-and-one-half months, her body was fairly well preserved and there was no evidence of a previous autopsy. Dr. Coppolino, according to his Sarasota neighbors who testified yesterday, told them that there had been an autopsy and that it proved Mrs. Coppolino died of a heart attack.

Mr. Schaub asked: "Did you form an opinion as to the condition of her health?"

"I found no evidence of disease of the body," Mr. Halpern replied.

Q. Did you make any other observation? A. I found no explanation of death from the condition of her organs. The organs were healthy.

Q. Did you examine the heart? A. Yes, it was normal in size, normal in weight—300 grams—and normal in substance, heart muscles, valves, lining, surface and blood vessels. The coronary arteries were all normal.

Q. Do you have an opinion of whether she died of heart disease? A. I would say with reasonable medical certainty she did not die of coronary occlusion or any type of heart disease.

Defense Objects

Mr. Bailey objected to further evidence along this line. He said "the defense is not contending she died of heart disease—we will accept the doctor's opinion that she did not."

Prosecutor Schaub asked Dr. Halpern if he had examined the surface of the body. Yes, said Dr. Halpern, and he produced color slides that riveted the attention of the jury on the puncture wound, which he described as "like a little crater in the skin."

Dr. Coppolino leaned forward

and gazed intently at the exhibits. Besides the perforation on the left buttock there were unexplained bruises on the right buttock. Mr. Bailey got Dr. Halpern to agree that these were common "black and blue marks

that could occur in everyday life."

Mr. Schaub immediately got Dr. Halpern to concede the bruises could have been caused by a hand pressing forcibly down on the body.

Attempts by the prosecution

to elicit from Dr. Halpern the opinion that the needle wound could not have been self-inflicted brought objections from Mr. Bailey. He contended Dr. Halpern had no expert knowledge in that field. The objections were sustained.