

Drug Experts Testifying Against Clark

By FRED DELANO

MASON -- Dr. Ronald E. Clark listened studiously without a trace of outward emotion to three days of testimony this week accusing him of fatal misuse of the barbiturate sodium pentothal as he stood trial in Ingham County Circuit Court on a charge of manslaughter.

The Farmington Township physician, formerly of Redford, has seen a parade of medical witnesses inform the jury as to the drug's dangers, even when used as a carefully controlled anesthetic. Thursday he still sat passively as Dr. Frederick Rieders, director of the City of Philadelphia's Poison Information Center, testified: "It is my opinion that Grace Neil died from sodium pentothal poisoning, too large a dose having been administered too quickly."

It was the death of Mrs. Tharon E. (Grace) Neil, 43, of 20225 Rensselaer, Livonia, in his Farmington Township clinic at 140735 Grand River last Nov. 3 that triggered the criminal action against Dr. Clark, a practicing physician since 1943.

DR. RIEDERS, who was imported by the prosecution as its No. 1 expert, also testified: "Sodium pentothal is not a drug that is used in the treatment of any disease. Its major use is to render a person unconscious, or to induce a state of semi-consciousness as a truth serum that causes people to respond to questions."

He also told the jury that exact quantity of a "lethal dose" never has been determined through experimentation, only "after the fact" of a death. Sodium pentothal, he said, can render a person fully unconscious within 10 to 15 seconds "and it is a matter of judgment on the part of the anesthetist to determine when the patient has had enough."

"I think the dosage given this patient was given in less than an hour, probably in less than half an hour, and perhaps in less than 15 minutes from a bottle flowing freely, not dripping," said Dr. Rieders on the witness stand.

Asked whether sodium pentothal would have a beneficial effect on a person suffering from heart disease, high blood pressure and obesity, he answered, "No."

EARLIER THE JURY heard a witness quote Dr. Clark as having stated he had been treating Mrs. Neil for all three of those specific ailments.

As the trial entered its fourth day Friday, no effort had been made by the prosecution to bring Dr. Clark's record of appearances before the State Licensing Board into evidence. "Neither had there been any reference before the jury to the fact that police and the Oakland County prosecuting attorney still are studying deaths in his office of several other of Dr. Clark's patients besides Mrs. Neil."

Oakland Prosecutor S. Jerome Bronson publicly revealed facts pertaining to both of those phases shortly after Dr. Clark's arrest seven months ago, and the information he supplied was given wide publicity at the time. This is one of the reasons that prompted Defense Attorney Philip Rowston to petition that the trial be moved outside Oakland County.

Mrs. Neil's husband, Tharon, characterized his wife of 22 years as "having always been very healthy until around 1962 or 1963."

He said Dr. Clark suggested at that time she go on a diet, "and from that time on, she didn't seem like the same person."

Although Mrs. Neil has been identified as a "part-time assistant" in Dr. Clark's clinic,

the husband said her duties were on a volunteer basis and "I don't know that she ever received a paycheck." He said she had had no medical training. They had known the physician since about 1949.

THE HUSBAND testified Mrs. Neil had received medical treatment from Dr. Clark for several years, and that many times after being treated with sedatives, she did not come home until the next day.

Neil said that sometimes he drove to the clinic and picked his wife up there and drove her home after treatments, adding:

"I had to practically carry her out to the car a number of times. A lot of times she wouldn't even know how she got home."

Dr. Gaylord Alexander, anesthesiologist at Sinai Hospital in Detroit who was called as an expert prosecution witness, told the jury he had administered sodium pentothal as an anesthetic at least 4,000 times in the last 11 years.

"It is too lethal a drug ever to leave a patient unattended while it is being administered," he stated in answer to a question tracing to other testimony that after Dr. Clark allegedly began the drip-method sodium pentothal treatment of Mrs. Neil Nov. 3 he had left the room for some time.

IT HAS BEEN testified that he sent his wife back to check whether the injection was proceeding properly and that it then was Mrs. Clark who found that Mrs. Neil had died.

"I would think it to be malpractice to leave a patient unattended; an overdose could kill a person," Dr. Alexander declared on the witness stand.

HIGHLIGHTS of earlier testimony included these assertions:

August Kline, of Royal Oak, whose wife had been a patient of Dr. Clark's for more than two years, declared that upon his visit to the clinic about 5:15 p.m. Nov. 3 to pick up medication he had seen Mrs. Neil in her role as office assistant.

Kline said, "She appeared as she normally appeared, sort of haggard and pale."

Dr. Richard E. Olson, pathologist at St. Joseph Hospital in Pontiac, who performed the autopsy, said that his examination showed "the body was of a middle aged woman in a good state of general health."

"The heart was completely normal for a woman her age," said Dr. Olson, "and I found no evidence in the kidneys or heart that she had suffered from high blood pressure. Her weight, which I would estimate at 125 pounds, was about average for her age. I would not consider her obese."

"After examining the body carefully externally, as well as inside the body and head, I was not able to point to anything and say this was the cause of death."

DR. DAVID KUTOF, toxicologist from the crime laboratory of the Michigan Health Department, testified specifically that tests on samples from Mrs. Neil's body showed "death resulted from an overdose of sodium pentothal."

He said these tests were of blood samples received shortly after the autopsy.

"I found the blood contained 3.1 milligrams of sodium pentothal per 100 grams of blood," he told the jury.

He also testified that a recent examination of the brain revealed a concentration of 17.1 milligrams of sodium pentothal per 100 grams adding that the higher concentration was due to the human brain being more absorbent than the bloodstream.

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