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Doctor Says He Falsified Cancer Data to Help Patients

By CLYDE H. FARNSWORTH, Published: April 1, 1994

MONTREAL, MARCH 31— Dr. Roger Poisson, a prominent Montreal surgeon who has admitted falsifying data in a major North American breast cancer study, said today that he might have broken some rules but did so out of devotion to patients whose inclusion in the research qualified them for state-of-the-art treatment.

He berated his critics, chiefly in the United States, who he said wanted him to blindly obey rigid research guidelines. He accused the critics of persecuting him and "taking the same attitude towards me as the States had against Somalia and Vietnam."

Dr. Poisson, 62, who had been hospitalized for the last 10 days in connection with a stress-related ailment, met with reporters in the office of his lawyer, William Brock. The doctor said he had antagonized the United States medical establishment by advocating a lumpectomy rather than a mastectomy in treating breast cancer before a lumpectomy, a less disfiguring operation, became accepted practice. The establishment was now using him as a scapegoat, he said. Shock to Canadian Doctors

Dr. Poisson, who was stripped of his post as head of cancer research at the Saint-Luc Hospital, a teaching hospital of the University of Montreal, is accused of supplying false data on 99 of the 1,511 patients he enrolled in the study. The study is considered a highly important contribution to treatment of breast cancer.

The disclosures of the false data have sent shockwaves through the Canadian medical profession. American auditors are combing the records of two other Montreal teaching hospitals that participated in the study -- Saint Mary's Hospital and Jewish General Hospital -- looking for irregularities.

Dr. Poisson said his irregularities were of a technical nature and did not affect the findings of the research. He acknowledged that there were 115 anomalies in his reporting during the 15 years he participated in the study.

One of the 22 rules in the research agreement was that women had to join the study within 28 days of a breast cancer diagnosis. That was later changed to 56 days. 54 Diagnosis Dates Changed

In 54 of the 115 cases, he said, he altered the diagnosis dates to get patients into the study in which they qualify for advanced treatment methods.

By standard ethical procedures, however, patients are given a choice of whether to enter clinical trials. If they choose not to do so, they are expected to receive state-of-the-art medical care. The goal of a trial is to determine whether a new treatment is better or worse than the standard; if the new treatment proved to be more advanced, there would be no need for a trial.

Dr. Dwight Kaufman, deputy director of cancer treatment at the National Cancer Institute, which was one of the sponsors of the seminal study, called Dr. Poisson's comments "farcical." He said the Montreal surgeon had shown that he had "no understanding or respect for the scientific method in research."

He emphasized that Dr. Poisson "misses the point of the potential harm to women around the world that could have come from tainted and fraudulent data."

Dr. Poisson said that in 30 years of treating breast cancer patients, his goal had been to provide "the best treatment available with the least amount of mutilation possible."

He asked not to be judged on the discrepancies in his research data but on his larger contributions to patient well-being.

In an open letter published today in La Presse, one of the city's leading newspapers, he said that Quebec had the lowest rate of mastectomies in all of North America, one of the highest rates of chemotherapy in place of surgery, and one of the best records of early detection of breast cancer tumors in the world.

Dr. Poisson has been barred from participating in any United States-financed medical research, but apart from losing his title at Saint-Luc he has not been reprimanded by the authorities in Canada.

Dr. Poisson declined to answer questions related to any possible claims that the National Cancer Institute might have against Saint-Luc's or himself. The institute gave the hospital \$1 million for the study, and United States officials have taken steps to recover the money.

Mr. Brock, the lawyer, said: "I don't think we have any liability, but we don't really want to comment. No claim is pending, and no claim has yet been made."

While maintaining that he had done nothing basically wrong and that "truth is nuanced and not all black and white," Dr. Poisson did concede that an apology to his profession might be in order.

Asked whether he wanted to apologize, he shook his head affirmatively and replied, "In hindsight, knowing what I know now."

In conducting the studies, he said, he was "enthusiastic, perhaps a little too enthusiastic."

Asked how he sees his future, he said that breast cancer "is my profession, and my profession is my life." He recalled words that he attributed to Rudyard Kipling: "Man is great once he has lost everything and is capable of rising again."

Dr. Roger Poisson, who has admitted falsifying data in a major breast cancer study, met with reporters yesterday in his lawyer's office. (Robert Frechette for The New York Times)

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