

Our doctors need a public watchdog

OTTAWA

Doctors traditionally have been opposed to the idea of outside inspection or supervision of their profession. The principle has been that the only person who is qualified to tell a doctor what to do is another doctor.

Next Wednesday, in the red brick courthouse at L'Orignal, Ont., midway between Ottawa and Montreal, this principle will be upheld and, at the same time, violated.

It will be violated by five members of a coroner's jury who will assess the competence of the medical staff at Ottawa's Montfort Hospital. But it will also be upheld, in a sense, because this unusual inquest will take place at the instigation of a doctor.

The doctor in this case is the father of a young man who died at Montfort Hospital last Dec. 15 after a head-on collision on the suicidal two-lane high-



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way that runs from Ottawa to the Ontario-Quebec border.

The inquest will be held only because Dr. Frank A. Sreter, of British Columbia, has violated what many people believe to be the doctor's code. In an action that must be almost without precedent in the medical profession, he has charged, in a letter to Ontario's attorney-general, Allan Lawrence, that his son "died a medically preventable death and that cardinal rules of surgical emergency treatment had been violated."

His son, Frank Sreter, 26, was a graduate student at the University of

Ottawa when he died at Montfort Hospital about three hours after the highway accident.

An autopsy report, accepted by an Ottawa area coroner, stated that the initial cause of death was a ruptured spleen. The coroner said at the time that no inquest was being considered. Doctors and administrators at the hospital refused to comment on the case.

In all probability, the autopsy report would have been the last word on the case except for the fact that Frank Sreter's father is a doctor, an associate in the neurology department at Harvard Medical School currently working on a research program in muscular dystrophy at Boston.

Unwilling to accept the autopsy report at face value, Dr. Sreter, through friends in Ottawa and telephone calls, questioned witnesses to the accident, including a man who had given first aid to his son at the scene. He also questioned people at the hospital and, unlike the layman, he knew what questions to ask.

The results of this investigation were contained in a letter sent by Dr. Sreter to the attorney-general and published, in part, in the Ottawa Journal last Jan. 8. The attorney-general's office subsequently ordered an inquest by Dr. Royal Kirby, coroner of Prescott County where the accident occurred.

Dr. Sreter later wrote to the Journal saying that two days after his account had appeared in the newspaper "the hospital finally sent the records I had requested. I believe they acted because of your news story."

Regardless of the outcome of the inquest, the Sreter case already illustrates some of the difficulties encountered by people who want to question medical or hospital care—difficulties which most people would find almost insuperable.

I remember a television technician coming to me in Montreal last year



THE RIGHTS OF PATIENTS should be protected by appeal system, suggests Peter Desbarats, despite doctors' traditional opposition to outside inspection.

with a story of inadequate hospital care received by his mother before her death. He had taken his complaints to the hospital administration.

Despite long delays obviously intended to discourage him, he had insisted on explanations. The hospital finally assured him, without giving specific answers, that everything possible had been done for his mother. The technician, a reasonable man, was completely dissatisfied with the hospital's response but he didn't know where to turn.

He could have asked the chief coroner of the province, also a doctor, for an investigation which the coroner would have had the right to conduct in private, if he wished. Beyond that, he could have requested an investigation by the attorney-general or taken legal action on his own account—both procedures being beyond the initiative or

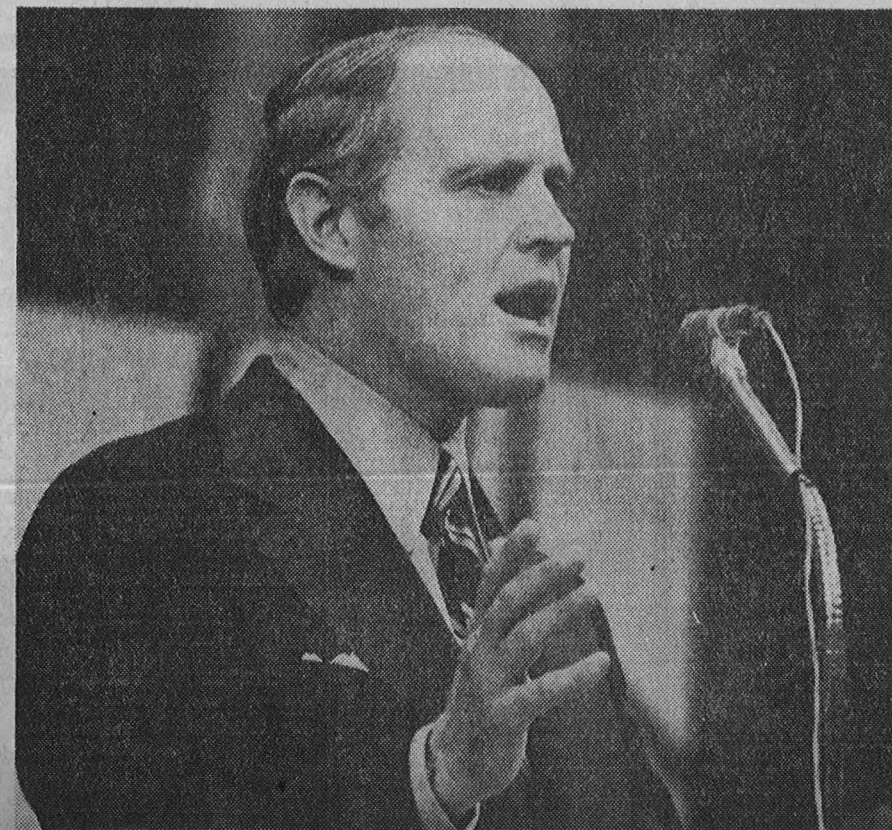
financial resources of many people.

The Sreter case, and all the others which never reach the public, indicate a need for ombudsman-type mechanisms in many professions.

Most journalists now accept in principle the idea of provincial and community press councils with public representation, although implementation has proved to be a slow process. Only last weekend, Manitoba dentists agreed to set up a mechanism to investigate patients' complaints but maintained the principle of "peer review." Only dentists will investigate dentists.

With medical and hospital care becoming an increasingly complex responsibility of the state, the rights of patients have to be protected by simple, efficient appeal processes.

If you have to be a doctor to make the present system work for you, it's not good enough.



UNUSUAL INQUEST will take place next week in Ontario because doctor-father of accident victim asked questions of Allan Lawrence, attorney-general.