

People

June 23, 1986

Vol. 25

No. 25

A Golfer's Mysterious Death Suggests That Lawn Care May Be Hazardous to Your Health

By David Grogan

Granted a few days' leave at the end of August 1982, Navy Lieut. George Prior, 30, grabbed his golf clubs and headed for the Army Navy Country Club course near his Arlington, Va. home. Playing conditions were perfect: The greens were particularly lush from a recent spraying to remove brown spots. Unfortunately, Prior's holiday mood was quickly lowered by the onset of a flu-like illness. He came home feeling nauseated and headachy. Prior was also uncharacteristically irritable, blowing up at his wife, Liza, for no apparent reason. By the end of his third day on the course, Prior was feeling seriously ill. When a quickly spreading rash appeared on his stomach, he checked himself into Bethesda's National Naval Medical Center.

"The next morning the rash developed into blisters, some of which were the size of baseballs," recalls Liza. "Then the blisters started to break, and the skin came peeling off all over his body." Unable to diagnose the mysterious illness, doctors stood powerless as Prior's internal organs failed. His condition worsened with distressing speed. Less than two weeks after entering the hospital, Prior died of a heart attack. "By then he was a hideously disfigured shell of a man," says Liza. "Death was a merciful escape."

If George Prior had been a civilian, his death might have gone unexplained, but the abrupt loss of a fit young naval officer set off alarms at the Naval Research Laboratory in Washington, D.C. A flight navigator who ferried Navy scientists around the country, Prior had just passed a rigorous annual physical. His medical records indicated he was in top condition and had no history of allergies. Concerned that other military personnel might be at risk, the research lab called in Dr. Jonathan Lord, one of the Navy's top forensic pathologists, to find out what killed George Prior.

Lord learned that Prior was extremely health conscious. The investigation revealed, however, that he had been plagued by an unusual pattern of health complaints after playing golf at the Army Navy club. The symptoms had passed quickly, and Prior had blamed his queasiness on sunstroke, the headaches on a habit of grinding his teeth.

Intrigued by these clues, Lord sent a colleague over the golf course in a Navy helicopter. Through infrared photography, he discovered that the course was saturated with Daconil 2787, a fungicide that the club sprayed weekly, believing it to be harmless. Then Lord found that some 10 years earlier, four people had died in a manner similar to Prior after a chemical like Daconil was used to fumigate their Florida house. Lord examined Prior's shoes, clubs and golf balls under ultraviolet light and found they were coated with Daconil. Putting all this circumstantial evidence together, Lord concluded that Daconil, a substance to which Prior was apparently highly allergic, had killed him. "You don't have a direct link, like you'd have in a gunshot wound," Lord has said. "But that is the way it is going to be in every environmental case."

In July 1983, armed with the results of Lord's investigation, Liza Prior filed a \$20 million wrongful death lawsuit against the Army Navy Country Club and Daconil's manufacturer, Diamond Shamrock Corp. The case may go to trial later this year, and the manufacturer plans a vigorous defense. "Daconil has been widely marketed for more than 15 years, and nothing like this has shown up before," says spokesman Gary Eilrich. "The probability that it was the cause of Prior's death is near zero."

Indeed, millions of golfers have played on Daconil-sprayed courses without ill effects. Nevertheless, environmentalists contend that Prior's death should be seen as a timely warning for Americans now spraying their lawns or exposing themselves to Daconil and other pesticides in parks, golf courses and public spaces. According to various studies, people living in cities and suburbs are now exposed to heavier doses of pesticides than farmers spraying their crops.

"Evidence of potential danger doesn't depend on producing dead bodies," says Dr. Samuel Epstein, an expert in environmental toxicology at the University of Illinois Medical Center. "Apart from the risks of acute exposure due to a massive overapplication of toxic chemicals in the environment, the real concern is over long-term effects, including birth defects, neurological problems and cancer."

No one knows how many they number, but for those Americans with an acute sensitivity to pesticides the threat can be grave. Claire Connelly, a "fresh air freak" from Baltimore, used to delight in watching her daughter, Megan, now 4, gather dandelions during daily walks. But in April 1984 Megan came down with a high fever and a strange rash whenever a lawn in the neighborhood was sprayed. Then one hot, windy summer's day, after lawn-care companies had sprayed four yards across the street, Megan became violently ill. By next morning the child was almost catatonic. "Her eyes went blank, her back arched, and her mouth locked," says Connelly. "I couldn't help thinking, 'They are killing her like a bug.' It was horrible."

Megan recovered from the attack but now spends much of the summer inside the house, with the windows and doors sealed against pesticide vapors. Her mother watches in horror when lawn-spray trucks come through the neighborhood. "I used to think, 'Hey, this is the U.S.A. Those trucks can't be carrying anything harmful,'" Claire says. "Now I know better."

Connelly took her complaints to the law firm of Goldstein, Weltchek and Associates, which last week filed a federal class action suit claiming that commercial lawn-spray services may be responsible for a variety of health problems, ranging from acute cases of respiratory arrest to chronic nervous disorders. "Many of the people we represent might not have been harmed if there'd been some prior warning of spraying," says attorney Robert Weltchek. "But some people are so sensitive to the chemicals they have trouble every time they walk out the door."

Industry spokesmen argue that documented cases of serious illness caused by lawn-care pesticides are rare. "There are no scientific studies now that would suggest these chemicals are not safe when applied properly," says James Brooks, executive director of the Lawn Care Association of America. Yet Congress was told last April that lack of data cannot be equated with lack of danger. After a 12-month investigation, the General Accounting Office concluded that most nonagricultural pesticides in current use have not been fully tested, despite often misleading safety claims by lawn-care and pest-

control companies.

Environmentalists are lobbying for laws requiring lawn-care companies to post signs when they spray. In 1984 such a "right to know" ordinance was passed in Wauconda, Ill. (pop. 5,700), thanks to June Larson, a retired telephone operator. Larson's 37-year-old daughter, Kathy, suffers from muscular dystrophy and is hypersensitive to toxic chemicals. About 40 other municipalities across the country are considering similar regulations, but manufacturers of the garden chemicals oppose such rules. The Pesticide Public Policy Foundation, a national association based in Oregon, successfully sued to have the Wauconda ordinance struck down, arguing that it infringed on state and federal regulatory authority. Foundation director David Dietz contends that warning signs needlessly alarm lawn-care customers and scar the landscape. "We see no sense," he says, "in making a town's lawns look like a political campaign six months out of the year." Wauconda is currently appealing the decision in state supreme court. "I was stunned when the lawn-care companies jumped on our village," says June Larson. "It seems like putting up signs is such a simple thing to do."

Meanwhile the chemical onslaught on weeds and bugs continues. But increasingly people are weighing the value of America's quest for the perfect lawn. "To me, a lawn should be something you can safely roll around on with your kids and pets," says Liza Prior. "The idea of an incredible green carpet that has been covered with chemicals is crazy."

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