

George Maurice Spragg

Isle of Wight County Press – 26 September 1931

SAD DEATH OF A NEWPORT YOUTH

FATAL ANTHRAX POISONING

The Deputy Coroner (F. A. Joyce, Esq.), sitting with a jury, of which Mr. B. Jolliffe was foreman, held an inquiry at the Guildhall, Newport, yesterday (Friday) into the peculiarly sad and unusual circumstances attending the death of George Maurice Spragg, aged 18 ½, son of Joseph Alfred Spragg, of 9 Beech-road, Newport, employed by the Newport Corporation. The lad, who was employed by the I.W. Hair Co., of Newport-road, Cowes, was taken ill on Monday and died on Wednesday. Mr. C. N. Pye (H.M. Inspector of Factories) attended the inquiry, and Mr. C. E. Martin (Southampton) appeared for Mr. C. F. Hiscock, on behalf of the employers, the relatives of the deceased being represented by Mr. H. R. Palmer.

The father said his son had been employed at the factory named for about four years and had not had an illness since childhood. He did not eat any food from Saturday dinner-time. On Monday morning he complained of a pain in the head and stomach and could not retain tea. Witness suggested that a doctor should be sent for, but his son replied that he should be all right on the morrow. On Tuesday he saw him again at 5 p.m. He could see a change and sent for Dr. Dowdall. Deceased passed away in his sleep early the next morning. He did not appear seriously ill until he became strange in the head the previous evening. – Mr. Martin: Is it not a fact that your son had a delicate stomach? – Witness: He has never had a doctor. He was not an unhealthy lad in any way.

Dr. John Joseph Dowdall, of Newport, deposed that on Tuesday evening he found Spragg unconscious, with a temperature of over 105. He was unable to diagnose the exact cause of the illness, but gave instructions how to reduce the temperature. He made a post-mortem examination with Dr. W. S. Wallace, and Dr. Wallace made a bacteriological examination, as a result of which he expressed the opinion that anthrax was the cause of death. Witness had had no previous experience of this disease, which was rare in human beings.

Dr. William Semple Wallace, medical officer of health for Newport, and bacteriologist to the County Council, told the coroner and jury that he found a very profuse growth of the anthrax bacillus in the body. In this case the anthrax was caused by a direct inhalation of the spores into the air passages. There was no abrasion on the body. There was evidence that anthrax could enter the body in this manner and it was called the wool sorters' disease. Anthrax could come from the hairs of any cattle. – Mr. Palmer: Have you inspected the premises where this man was employed? – Yes, in my capacity as medical officer. – Q. That is the sort of place where this disease originates? – Yes. – Mr. Martin asked the doctor if he had ever heard of a case of anthrax coming from other than a sore. – Dr. Wallace said there were two types of the disease, the pulmonary and the pustular, and he had seen both. – Q. These cases are very isolated – you have heard of more cases arising from abrasions of the skin? – Yes.

Stanley Berry Dixon, of Fairbanks, Mill Hill-road, Cowes, managing director of the I.W. Hair Co. Ltd., stated that the deceased had been in their employ since September, 1927, engaged principally in washing and drying horse or cattle hair. The supplies of hair came from all over the world. There were regulations regarding the handling of hair, which had been complied with. Ever since he had been in their employ the boy had suffered from stomach trouble, but he was very plucky and would not give in. They had had no previous trouble regarding anthrax, but in July, 1925, before they acquired the premises there was a case. – By Mr. C. N. Pye (H.M. Inspector of Factories): Do you use hair from Manchuria, Siberia, or Russia? – We had one parcel in June, but we try to avoid doing so. – Q. Has that all been used? – No, there is still some untouched. – Q. So that material has been going through your factory since June? – Yes. – Q. The working of that material is definitely under regulations? –

Yes. – The Inspector explained to the jury that the only hair which would come under these regulations would be that one parcel from Manchuria. The main regulations applied to the disinfection of the hair. – In reply to the Inspector, the witness explained that this hair was put into the disinfecting tank treated with a super-concentrated saline, and heated to a temperature of 100 degrees. After two or three hours the hair was taken out, washed, and dried. The hair went through other purifying processes, and the disinfection was carried out by the foreman and himself. The only time the deceased would touch the bag would be after it was disinfected. It was quite possible to get anthrax from other hair. Spragg had not gone near the disinfection tank for over a month. Cautionary notices about anthrax were displayed on the wall. – The Deputy Coroner said he wanted to find out whether the boy had access to the stuff in any way. Did he help in the washing? – Witness, Yes, after it was disinfected. – The Inspector: Do you wash all the hair that comes into the factory? – Yes, every bit. – Mr. Palmer (to witness): Whenever the deceased was at work he was breathing the air where this stuff was, not only the hair from Siberia but from all over the world? – Yes. – Q. And he could not avoid it? – No. – Dr. Wallace asked the witness if he considered the temperature and the solution sufficient. He said that disinfection by steam was about the only thing known to kill the germs, and he asked the witness if disinfection by high pressure steam would be sufficient? – The witness replied in the affirmative. Dr. Wallace suggested to the Deputy Coroner that the Ministry of Health should recommend some better process than that in use. He was anxious to ascertain if the Ministry of Health was satisfied that this was a satisfactory process and one that safeguarded the men working in those factories. He pointed out that this was the second case in Cowes since 1925¹. The Deputy Coroner said a long period had elapsed. He had only known of one previous case in the Island. He did not know whether the jury would consider it within their province to make any recommendation. – Mr. Martin suggested that Dr. Wallace should make his own representations to the Ministry of Health, because he understood that the witness had strictly carried out the regulations under the Act. – The Deputy Coroner said that it seemed that the hair which came from Manchuria and China was subject to regulations which did not apply to other hair, but they had no tables of mortality showing the cases of anthrax from hair derived from that part of the world compared with those from other parts. It was possible that the Ministry of Health had come to the conclusion that it was not desirable to make regulations as to other hair.

The jury returned a verdict that death was due to anthrax poisoning, and that so far as they could judge the deceased's employers had carried out the prescribed regulations regarding disinfection.

Mr. Martin expressed the profound sympathy of the employers with the parents of the deceased. He said the deceased had been an excellent servant and was always a very plucky young fellow.

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¹ Charles Leslie Matthews, buried Northwood Cemetery - IWCP 25 July 1925