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Illness Described as Kidney Disease Compounded by Diabetes

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The kidney disease that killed Yuri Andropov was a long-standing and debilitating problem, intensified by even longer-standing diabetes, in the opinion of U.S. intelligence sources.

It is possible that he also underwent but rejected a kidney transplant, made in a last-ditch attempt to give him a new kidney to save him, these sources added yesterday. This conjecture was widespread in government circles here, first early this winter and even more intensively a few weeks ago.

"A transplant rejection, and the illness and infection that would go along with it, could certainly be consistent with all we've heard," Dr. George Schreiner, a Georgetown University kidney specialist, commented. "It's the kind of thing that could have kept him out of sight so long, yet let him keep in touch with government business."

Andropov's physical weaknesses triggered rumors from the day he took office 15 months ago. He was 68 then, far older than previous Soviet leaders when they came to power. He was stooped and his features were worn. It was known that he had diabetes, and observers wondered if he had the full strength for the job.

Andropov disappeared from public view last August, shortly after diplomats said he had looked shaky and weak and had to be helped in and out of his chair at a meeting.

In December, U.S. sources here said he had been on repeated kidney dialysis: use of an artificial kidney machine to cleanse his blood of impurities. There was no official confirmation until yesterday, when the Soviet news agency Tass said he began dialysis a year ago, only three months after taking office.

Government sources here admit that, aside from Tass' statement, they still have only "informed speculations" and "guesses" about Andropov's last months. But, taken with Tass' added details, they speculated that Andropov's diabetes and kidney trouble could well have caused his shaky appearance and difficulty in walking as early as last June.

Severe diabetes often causes arteriosclerosis (clogged blood vessels), hypertension (high blood pressure) and kidney disease. Tass said Andropov suffered from "interstitial nephritis" and "nephrosclerosis." This means that the kidneys were clogged by disease and unable to filter out body toxins and wastes—as well as "secondary hypertension and sugar diabetes ... worsened by chronic kidney insufficiency."

The final cause of death, Tass said, was "heart and vascular [blood vessel] insufficiency." The kidneys, blood vessels and heart often deteriorate together in a patient like Andropov.

Death, said one doctor here, "often results from what we call multifactorial causes." Even a postmortem, another doctor said, "does not always tell you the primary cause."

Tass said Andropov's dialysis "supplied satisfactory health and work capability" until last month. But only serious illness and disability could have forced the Soviet leader to stay out of view, several sources agreed.

A rejected kidney transplant, and the effect of the powerful drugs that would be used to try to combat a rejection, could have caused that kind of weakness. One government source said, "There is reason to believe this is a possibility."

Still another illness, progressive muscular atrophy—a possibility reported from Moscow Wednesday—could have added to his disability. This is a milder variant of Lou Gehrig's Disease (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis). It can be disabling and even affect speech, but victims may live many years.

During most of Andropov's illness, the Soviet government said he had only "a cold."

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