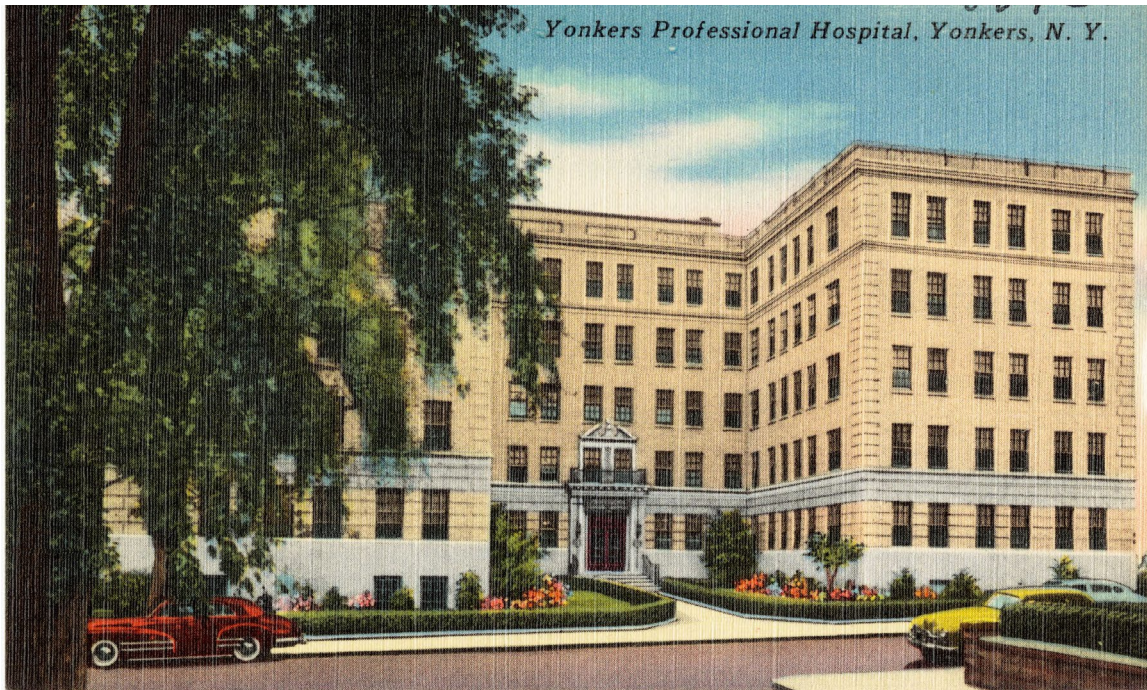


## The Little-Known Sex Reassignment Mecca of the East Coast

By Sandy Mesics

Yonkers Professional Hospital was a six-story 150-bed hospital at 27 Ludlow Street in Yonkers, New York, an inner suburb of New York City. It was established by a group of doctors in 1930 and opened its doors in 1932. It was the smallest of the city's four hospitals, and in its 50-year existence was never considered a very good hospital. However, for a few short years in the 1970s, it was a center of transgender surgery on the East Coast.



<https://www.digitalcommonwealth.org/search/commonwealth:3x816v357>

It turns out that as early as 1949, Yonkers Professional Hospital was involved in gender reassignment surgeries. On May 30, 1949, *Time Magazine* reported on the case of "Joan," a male pseudohermaphrodite who underwent a three-hour surgery by Dr. Louis William Maraventano to convert the female-appearing genitalia into male genitalia. Apparently, this surgery was very successful, and by 1953, Dr. Maraventano had performed about 50 such operations, as reported in *Jet Magazine*, Jan 22, 1953. <sup>1</sup>

In 1950, the ultimate course at Yonkers Professional Hospital would be set when Dr. Benito Rish joined the staff. Born in Pachuca, Mexico, in 1923, Rish earned his doctoral degrees from the University of Virginia in 1949. In the Army he was stationed at the Walter Reed Hospital in Washington DC. In 1950 he developed an acrylic plastic chin implant which was named after him. He was also credited with

developing five surgical instruments. He served as chief of plastic surgery from 1950 to 1965.

By 1966 Rish had published 11 papers and had been elected to the board of the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery. He also served as assistant clinical professor of surgery at the Albert Einstein School of Medicine in New York City. He made news in 1968 by creating dimples and clefts for patients as an outpatient procedure. Rish eventually would become the hospital's president. He would be replaced as chief of plastic surgery in 1965 by Dr. Michael Morrissey, a plastic surgeon.

The hospital grew steadily in the 1960s. By 1963, the hospital was admitting over 6,000 patients a year, and the average daily census was 126 patients. In 1967 there were attempts by the service and maintenance personnel to unionize. In August 1967, the hospital opened a 12-bed intensive care/cardiac care unit. The first two floors of the hospital were private offices, and the hospital itself was on the third, fourth, and fifth floors. The operating and recovery rooms were located in the penthouse. The author's personal recollection was that the operating rooms were tiled in green from floor to ceiling, and the lighting was augmented by spectacular natural lighting flooding in from large windows facing the sky.

Hospital rooms were both private and semi-private. While the rooms had a bathroom with toilet and sinks, the showers were separate rooms accessed from the hallways. The hospital was privately owned and non-tax exempt. It was also becoming a mecca for cosmetic surgery. In 1968 Rish boasted that the hospital did more cosmetic surgery than all of Westchester County, New York.<sup>2</sup>

In 1969 a group of 25 physicians led by Dr. Rish bought the hospital from the original corporation.<sup>3</sup> This contributed to the popularity of Yonkers Professional Hospital as a site for cosmetic surgery. Indeed, this specialty blossomed in the 1970s. A \$2 million medical office building annex to the hospital was completed in 1973, and Rish reported that admissions for cosmetic surgery had increased 10 percent a year for the years 1970-1975. He was now head of a six-doctor department that included plastic surgeons Dr. Michael Morrissey, Eung Kim, David Wesser, Paul Striker, and P. Sherman.

In 1975, the facility was being called "THE place to go for cosmetic plastic surgery." The hospital was reportedly performing one sex reassignment procedure per week, although that was likely downplayed, as they were performing them almost daily. By 1976, David Wesser had performed more than 300 sex reassignment procedures himself, and he pioneered techniques that resulted in a sensate clitoris as well as a vaginal cavity. According to a newspaper item, "It is one of the few places in the country with a Gender Identity Center which consists of a board of eight doctors – plastic surgeons, psychiatrists, urologist and anesthesiologist." Rish boasted, "We

have had many successful cases where these [trans] girls have married and adopted children without their spouses even knowing they have had a transsexual operation.” In the 1980s, a newspaper article mentioned that “... patients most often walk in as men and exit as women.”<sup>4</sup>

In an almost unimaginable breach of confidentiality, Rish reported that Hedy Lamarr, Jolie Gabor (sister of Zsa-Zsa and Eva), Mrs. Whitey Ford, Rocky Marciano and Ralph Nader had been cosmetic surgery patients there.<sup>5</sup>

By the end of the 1970s the hospital was doing approximately 1,200 to 1,400 major procedures per year. Most of the plastic surgery procedures performed at Yonkers were rhinoplasties and facelifts. By 1980 Dr. Morrissey was performing one and two breast implant procedures a week and developed new techniques to minimize scarring. But things were not going well with the facility. The author arrived at the hospital on March 21, 1980, for breast augmentation surgery with Dr. Wesser, and immediately noted how run-down and dreary the facility was. Wind whistled through the windows, the place was not spotless, and it seemed understaffed.

On April 29, 1980, the hospital was shuttered after having declared bankruptcy in February. The hospital owed \$2.8 million, and its total assets were \$1.3 million. Hospital officials blamed it on slow reimbursement by Medicaid, Medicare and Blue Cross.<sup>6</sup> However, another factor was that some of its physicians, concerned about the facility’s future, started admitting patients to other hospitals. When the hospital closed, only 65 of its 150 beds were occupied.<sup>7</sup> All these patients were transferred to other institutions, and 250 employees were left jobless. The affiliated physicians were appointed to the other three hospitals in Yonkers.

Yonkers Professional Hospital representatives also admitted that they had falsified financial records to get Medicaid, Blue Cross and Blue Shield reimbursements for elective cosmetic procedures that were not eligible for reimbursement. This included falsification of operating room records and billing records. The hospital was ordered to make \$5,000 in restitution to the state of New York, Blue Cross and Blue Sheild, and to pay a \$3,000 fine.<sup>8</sup>

A local church investigated buying the facility, valued at \$490,200, for an ambulatory surgery center and community nutrition center.<sup>9</sup> There was also a proposal to transform the facility into housing for homeless families, but the cost of renovations at \$3.5 million to \$4.1 was considered too expensive and local residents were extremely opposed to this plan. Yonkers Mayor Angelo Martinelli proposed using the facility for stores, offices and moderately priced apartments.<sup>10</sup> None of these plans would come to fruition.

The hospital remained vacant for several years until it was sold to Kurt J. Wittek, a real estate developer, for \$1.2 million. Wittek gutted the structure with plans to

convert it into apartments, the average size of the units being 715 square feet and selling from \$90,000 to \$130,000.<sup>11</sup> Wittek poured \$7 million into the building's rehabilitation. On July 23, 1988, the building, now rechristened "The Dover" opened for sale. The 10 studio Co-op apartments sold for \$72,000, the 46 one-bedroom units were \$84,000, and the 14 two-bedroom units were \$144,000. The facility featured a health club with sauna, laundry facilities, community rooftop deck, security, and on-site parking.<sup>12</sup>

And what became of the physicians? Some of them did not fare well in the long run.

Dr. Benito Rish admitted to providing hormones to trans women without prior psychological evaluations or doing lab workups. He provided injections for \$35 and wrote prescriptions for hormones at no charge. He added that he only did this for existing patients. While not illegal, this was contrary to the Harry Benjamin guidelines for trans care.<sup>13</sup>

More seriously, though, Rish pleaded guilty to insurance fraud in March 2000. He was co-owner of the Lafontaine-Rish Medical Association in Manhattan. His partner, Sonia Lafontaine, was also convicted of insurance fraud, where she allegedly performed some medical procedures though she was not a physician. (Staten Island Advance 7/13/2000) Rish surrendered his license for allowing two unlicensed individuals to perform medical procedures under his name and signed operative reports without reviewing them. Rish died in 2007 at the age of 83.<sup>14</sup>

In July 1987, one of Michael Morrissey's breast implant patients died of excessive anesthesia which he administered. The tragedy was repeated a year later, this time from the patient having received too little anesthesia from a nurse anesthetist under his supervision. In March 1991, his medical license was revoked.<sup>15</sup>

In 1981 Wesser and psychiatrist Milton Reisner were charged with negligence and gross incompetence in connection with the care of five transgender patients, after one of them committed suicide postoperatively. The basis for the charges was that Reisner and Wesser had diagnosed transsexualism and performed gender-change operations without obtaining an adequate medical history, adequate physical or psychiatric consultations and without having obtained adequate informed consent. The New York hearing committee considered the Yonkers Gender Identity Evaluation Committee a sham, despite the fact that Reisner was a board-certified psychiatrist. Moreover, Wesser contended that he followed the protocol for gender-change operations filed with the board of health by a duly certified hospital.

The hearing committee was extremely biased against transgender care, and David Wesser eventually had his license suspended by the State of New York, so he went to practice in New Jersey. He came under considerable criticism for this move. One of Wesser's liposuction patients died from an allergic reaction to the

anesthesia administered by a nurse-anesthetist. This triggered malpractice cases against Wesser in New Jersey, which resulted in Wesser losing his license to practice in New Jersey. Because of the action in New Jersey and the suspension of his license in New York, in 1994, Wesser was fined and his New York license revoked, essentially ending his career at the age of 60. He died in 2008 at the age of 75.<sup>16</sup>

Other Yonkers physicians fared better. Paul Striker was affiliated with the New York Eye and Ear Infirmary and the Lutheran Medical Center in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. He launched his own line of skin care products called “Thavma Skin Care.” He pioneered the use of liposuction for gynecomastia. Eung Kim practiced at St. John's Riverside Hospital in Yonkers, NY and at Phelps Memorial Hospital in Tarrytown, NY, where he briefly served as Chief of Plastic Surgery. He died in 2014 at the age of 81.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> <https://archive.org/details/bluebook-june-1953/page/44/mode/1up?view=theater>

<sup>2</sup> Professional hospital here features plastic surgery. The Herald Statesman [Yonkers, New York] Thursday May 16, 1968.

<sup>3</sup> Professional hospital takes on look of future. The Herald Statesman, Tuesday, March 20, 1973.

<sup>4</sup> Yonkers hospital a forerunner in new surgery techniques. The Reporter Dispatch, White Plains, New York, Tuesday February 26, 1980, p. 29)

<sup>5</sup> Hospital in Yonkers opens way to new faces and lives. The Daily Item, Port Chester, New York. Thursday March 13, 1975, p. 8

<sup>6</sup> Bankrupt Yonkers hospital closes doors. Citizen Register, Wednesday April 30, 1980, p. 12)

<sup>7</sup> Loss of patients forced hospital to shut doors. The [Yonkers] Herald Statesman, Thursday, May 1, 1980, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Yonkers hospital admits doctoring business data. The Daily Times, Thursday, February 14, 1980.

<sup>9</sup> Canady seeks to buy Yonkers hospital. The Standard Star [New Rochelle, New York], Thursday, September 18, 1980.

<sup>10</sup> 2 plans offered for homeless. New York Daily News, Sunday April 6, 1986, page 644)

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<sup>11</sup> Urges KO of homeless site. New York Daily News, Thursday, January 16, 1986, page W2.

<sup>12</sup> The Dover: affordable housing for first time buyers in Yonkers. The Journal News, Wednesday, September 14, 1988. The Yonkers real estate picture. Daily News. Sunday, August 14, 1988, page 4. Dover co-ops open for sale. The Daily Item. Friday, August 5, 1988, page. 31.

<sup>13</sup> Buying hormones: Sexuality Sells. Newsday, Tuesday June 1, 1993, p. 56.

<sup>14</sup> Bogus docs, fraud eyed as clinic owner's trial begins. New York Daily News, June 6, 2000, page 20.

<sup>15</sup> Bottom of the barrel: 60 of hell's docs disciplined in '91. New York Daily News, Monday December 9, 1991, page 4. Jury convicts owner of a cosmetic surgery clinic of fraud. Staten Island Advance, Thursday, July 13, 2000.

<sup>16</sup> For more information, see Sandy Mesics website <https://sandymesics.org/>