

Late onset delusional disorder leads to slaying of famous physician

Struggles over insanity defense ensue

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"There's no question about what I did," said the 71-year old man accused of slaying a world-renowned ENT specialist at a famous Midwest medical center. "I committed the act. But he betrayed me. I trusted him. I suppose people like to get back at people. That's human nature."

The 71-year old accused had had a delusional disorder that doctors were plotting to remove his brain from the rest of his nervous system. He said he had been suffering for three years from an inner ear infection that caused him to lose his balance while walking. Hence, he began wearing tape on his feet to keep them attached to the ground. He believed doctors had been poisoning him with medications they had given him for a number of years for various hearing complaints he had. His hearing hadn't gotten better. His eardrum had been perforated with their persistent scrapings of the insides of his ears. Nothing worked. He felt a sense of panic and desperation. He wanted to get even with his persecutors, whom he felt were engaged in a conspiracy against him and him alone.

His delusional belief had been growing for approximately three years. He had seen a score of medical

specialists who tried to help his hearing problem. But no one thought to check his mind, the root of the problem. It culminated one spring day in 1992 in the shooting death of a famed specialist and researcher, 40 years old with two young children. The doctor had been honored by colleagues and medical associations for his inven-

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tiveness in fashioning hearing devices that restored hearing to scores of young patients. He was shot to death at a medical center clinic while examining the elderly delusional perpetrator. The elderly gentleman admitted he intended to kill both the doctor and himself that day, but ran out of bullets after firing a number of them into the body of his victim.

Then began the legal wrangling, the contentions over whether the geriatric perpetrator was indeed responsible for this heinous act. The local

community was outraged at being robbed of this famous son. What of his young wife and two small children? Who would pay?

State psychiatrists evaluating the man for criminal responsibility felt he was delusional at the time of the act. Two experts hired by the prosecution concluded that although he was mentally ill and burdened by terrible delusions, the elderly perpetrator knew the doctor would die when he pulled the trigger. They recommended a finding of guilty but mentally ill. In the end, the jury agreed with that recommendation. The ultimate difference in outcomes between the possible verdicts of not guilty by reason of insanity and guilty but mentally ill was where the man would be deposited until he died of natural causes a few years later: a state hospital for the criminally insane or a prison hospital for the "guilty but mentally ill."

The case illustrates so many points of missed opportunities, one doesn't know where to begin when describing them. The major one is this: Why hadn't anyone noted the perpetrator's obvious psychiatric problems as they grew in severity?

Another point the story illustrates is the jury's penchant for revenge despite potent evidence of the defendant's lack of blameworthiness. GBMI lets us get away with that, along with allowing us to fool ourselves into thinking we've done the right thing. Quite clean, really, but what's been accomplished? ☹

MUSE & VIEWS

Suit Against Higher Authority

In March 1998, a federal judge in Syracuse, NY, rejected the latest suit by Donald Drusky of East McKeesport, PA, in his 30-year battle against USX Corp. for ruining his life by firing him in 1968. Drusky had sued "God . . . the sovereign ruler of the universe" for taking "no corrective action" against Drusky's enemies and demanded that God compensate him with professional guitar-playing skills and the resurrection of his mother. Drusky argued that under the federal rules of civil procedure, he would win a default judgment if God failed to show up in court.

(Chuck Shepard: "News of the Weird", *Star Tribune*, p. E2, 4/15/99.)

— PHILLIP J. RESNICK MD