

Trial explores ex-coroner's cadaver deal with Carlow

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By Jonathan D. Silver

Pittsburgh - Prosecutors in Dr. Cyril H. Wecht's federal fraud trial yesterday trotted out reams of documents in an effort to show that unclaimed bodies were sent from the Allegheny County morgue to Carlow University in 2004 and 2005. As part of its 41-count indictment, the government claims that the former coroner improperly traded cadavers to Carlow so students could perform autopsies in exchange for free lab space to conduct autopsies for his private business.

The government has identified 16 bodies that were traded, part of an overall contention that Dr. Wecht used his public office for private gain.

Yesterday, Assistant U.S. Attorney James Wilson went through documents involving 16 unclaimed bodies, all but one of which had death certificates indicating no autopsy occurred. Many cases involved elderly people, all of whom died from natural causes.

Paperwork in 11 cases clearly showed that the corpses went to Carlow before being returned to the coroner's office and then cremated. Notations indicated that four were autopsied.

Mr. Wilson did not elicit any testimony from his witness, former chief deputy coroner Joseph Dominick, to show that the other dozen bodies were autopsied.

Mr. Dominick testified that Dr. Wecht never told him to cut corners or shirk his duty in finding a deceased's family members. He said Dr. Wecht was proud of the Carlow program.

Mr. Dominick said he once asked Dr. Wecht what benefit the coroner's office was getting out of the autopsies. He testified that Dr. Wecht told him it was helpful to Carlow students and also provided an opportunity to review cause and manner of death for cases that "might have flown a little bit under the radar."

Mr. Dominick testified that he never saw autopsy reports from Carlow or got any helpful information from the school about the deceased.

Despite the arrangement between Dr. Wecht and Carlow, county officials were never able to find a written agreement involving the coroner's office or its successor, the medical examiner's office.

Dr. Bruce Hirsch, executive secretary of the state's Humanity Gifts Registry, which is overseen by the Department of

Health, testified that his organization approved an application involving Carlow and Dr. Wecht -- but not until March 2006, after Dr. Wecht had left public office.

Mr. Hirsch acknowledged under cross-examination that sometimes the power of county coroners under state law with respect to unclaimed bodies supersedes that of the registry.

The Wecht defense contends that the Allegheny County coroner had the power to designate unclaimed bodies for educational purposes.

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