



Office of the Special Narcotics Prosecutor For the City of New York Bridget G. Brennan, Special Narcotics Prosecutor

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Physician Pleads Guilty to Manslaughter and Reckless Endangerment in the Deaths of Three Patients of his Flushing, Queens Pill Mill

Bridget G. Brennan, New York City's Special Narcotics Prosecutor, announces the guilty plea of Dr. LAWRENCE CHOY, the former operator of a medical clinic in Flushing, Queens, in connection with the deaths of three patients to whom he illegally sold prescriptions for opioids and other controlled substances in lethal dosages and combinations.

Earlier today, CHOY pled guilty to 34 felony counts, including two counts of Manslaughter in the Second Degree, five counts of Reckless Endangerment in the Second Degree and 27 counts of Criminal Sale of a Prescription for a Controlled Substance. The guilty plea was entered before Manhattan Supreme Court Justice Ann E. Scherzer, Part 93. Sentencing is set for September 10, 2019. CHOY is expected to receive a seven-year prison sentence under the terms of his plea.

CHOY was arrested on March 29, 2018 in Sheboygan, Wis., where he moved in 2017 after suddenly abandoning his Flushing medical practice. The long-term investigation was conducted by the Office of the Special Narcotics Prosecutor's (SNP) Prescription Drug Investigation Unit and Investigators Unit, the New York Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Strike Force Group Z-23 and the New York City Human Resource Administration (HRA), with assistance from the Nassau County Police Department and the Suffolk County Police Department. Strike Force Group Z-23 is comprised of agents and officers with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the New York City Police Department (NYPD).

In entering his guilty plea to two counts of Manslaughter in the Second Degree, CHOY admitted to causing the deaths of patients Eliot Castillo, 35, and Michael Ries, 30, both of whom fatally overdosed within three days of receiving prescriptions from the physician. The five counts of Reckless Endangerment to which CHOY pled guilty relate to five additional patients, including one who died of an overdose.

A licensed physician since 1981, CHOY specialized in internal medicine and nephrology (the treatment of diseased kidneys) and operated a full-time medical office at 142-20 Franklin Avenue in Flushing. Beginning in 2012, he began issuing prescriptions for dangerous levels of narcotics drugs in high-risk combinations with other controlled substances, including a high number of prescriptions for the opioid painkiller oxycodone. This shift coincided with the filing of tax warrants against CHOY for more than a million dollars in taxes owed.

Among his dangerous practices, CHOY simultaneously prescribed individual patients a trio of drugs including one or more opioids, a benzodiazepine (such as alprazolam or clonazepam) and a muscle relaxant (such as carisoprodol, commonly known by the trade name Soma). He failed to perform adequate examinations or follow up on signs of substance abuse, and continued to prescribed large amounts and dangerous combinations of drugs after becoming aware of patients' attempts to taper off addictive medications.

CHOY drew patients from a wide geographic area, including Long Island, Upstate New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. The criminal investigation was triggered when the Pennsylvania Attorney General's Office became aware that suspicious prescriptions issued in CHOY's name were being filled at pharmacies in that state, and then contacted law enforcement partners in New York.

Members of DEA's Strike Force Group Z-23 and SNP investigators conducted a court authorized search of CHOY's medical office in March of 2016 and seized records and computer equipment. CHOY left his practice in a state of disarray in June of 2017. Agents and investigators subsequently learned that CHOY had moved from his Manhattan apartment to Sheboygan, Wis. In August of 2017, members of Strike Force Group Z-23 and SNP investigators obtained a second court authorized search warrant for the office and seized additional records. CHOY has not been authorized to prescribe controlled substances since 2017.

The case is being prosecuted by Assistant District Attorney Brian Rodriguez and Assistant District Attorney Tess Cohen, Chief of the Prescription Drug Investigation Unit, with assistance from Investigative Analyst Jacquelyn MacMurray and members of the Investigators Unit and the Digital Forensics Unit.

Special Narcotics Prosecutor Bridget G. Brennan thanked Acting Queens District Attorney John M. Ryan, DEA New York, DEA Milwaukee District Office, the New York City Police Department, the New York City Human Resource Administration (HRA) and the New York State Health Department's Bureau of Narcotic Enforcement, as well as the Nassau County Police Department, the Suffolk County Police Department, the Pennsylvania Attorney General's Office, the New York City Office of Chief Medical Examiner (OCME), the Suffolk County Medical Examiner's Office, the Nassau County Medical Examiner's Office and the Sheboygan County Police Department.

The New York Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Strike Force is comprised of agents and officers of the DEA, the NYPD, Immigration and Customs Enforcement – Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), the New York State Police, the U. S. Internal Revenue Service Criminal Investigation Division, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), U.S. Customs and Border Protection, U.S. Secret Service, the U.S. Marshals Service, New York National Guard, the Clarkstown Police Department, U.S. Coast Guard, Port Washington Police Department and New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision.

DEFENDANT

GUILTY PLEA – AWAITING SENTENCE

Lawrence Choy
Sheboygan, WI
9/15/52

Manslaughter 2nd – 2 cts (2 1/3 - 7 years)
Reckless Endangerment 2nd – 5 cts (1 year)
Criminal Sale of a Prescription for a Controlled
Substance – 27 cts (3 1/2 years)
