



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

For Immediate Release
September 10, 2019

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Physician Sentenced to Seven Years in Prison for Patients' Deaths

Bridget G. Brennan, New York City's Special Narcotics Prosecutor, Queens Acting District Attorney John M. Ryan, Ray Donovan, Special Agent in Charge of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration's (DEA) New York Division, New York City Police Commissioner James P. O'Neill, New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA) Commissioner Steven Banks, Keith M. Corlett, Superintendent of the New York State Police, and Peter Fitzhugh, Special Agent in Charge of Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) New York City, announced the sentencing of Dr. LAWRENCE CHOY, former operator of a medical clinic in Flushing, Queens to seven years in prison and two years post release supervision on 34 counts stemming from illegal sales of prescriptions for controlled substances and the deaths of three patients.

Manhattan Supreme Court Justice Ann E. Scherzer sentenced CHOY, 66, to two and one-third to seven years in prison on each of two counts of Manslaughter in the Second Degree, one year in prison on each of five counts of Reckless Endangerment in the Second Degree and three and one-half years in prison on each of 27 counts of Criminal Sale of a Prescription for a Controlled Substance. Sentences are to run concurrently, with the exception of the last prescriptions CHOY issued to the manslaughter victims, which are to run consecutively. The prison sentence is to be followed by two years of post-release supervision.

The long-term investigation was conducted by the Office of the Special Narcotics Prosecutor's (SNP) Prescription Drug Investigation Unit and Investigators Unit, the DEA's New York Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Strike Force, Group Z-23, and HRA, with assistance from the Nassau County Police Department and the Suffolk County Police Department.

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. He was arrested in Sheboygan, Wis., where he had fled after abandoning his New York City practice. In pleading guilty on June 18, 2019, CHOY admitted he illegally sold prescriptions for opioids and other controlled substances in lethal dosages and combinations, and failed to perform adequate examinations or follow up on signs of substance abuse. This reckless criminal conduct resulted in the deaths of three patients.

Charges of Manslaughter in the Second Degree relate to 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. Reckless Endangerment charges relate to five additional patients, including one who fatally overdosed.

Castillo, a father of two, overdosed and died on February 23, 2013. He was found on a couch at his mother's home in Jamaica, Queens. Following an autopsy, the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) determined the cause of death to be the combined effects of oxycodone (an opioid pain reliever) and alprazolam (a benzodiazepine used to treat anxiety). A bottle of alprazolam found in Castillo's pocket had been prescribed by CHOY three days earlier. Castillo's health declined during the 11 months he was treated by CHOY, who frequently provided early prescription refills. Castillo entered a drug treatment program, resulting in a gap in oxycodone prescriptions. However, when Castillo relapsed, CHOY resumed simultaneous prescriptions for oxycodone and alprazolam, the drug combination that caused his death.

Ries fatally overdosed on March 23, 2014 at his family's home in Hauppauge, L.I. The cause of death was the combined effects of oxycodone, alprazolam and carisoprodol (a muscle relaxant), substances known to have a synergistic effect on breathing, increasing risk of death. Several empty pill bottles at the scene were associated with prescriptions issued by CHOY during the preceding six months. Ries initially saw CHOY for treatment of anxiety and had never before been prescribed an opioid medication. Ultimately, CHOY prescribed Ries the highly dangerous combination of oxycodone, alprazolam and carisoprodol. CHOY increased Ries' prescriptions even as his condition deteriorated, resulting in a series of accidents. Shortly before Ries' death, CHOY had issued prescriptions for 24 pills per day, with a total morphine milligram equivalent (MME) of more than triple the maximum amount recommended by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Special Narcotics Prosecutor Bridget G. Brennan said, "While today's sentencing cannot erase the harm caused by Lawrence Choy, it may bring closure to families who lost loved ones and hope to patients who looked to him for treatment and instead developed addiction."

Queens Acting District Attorney John M. Ryan said, "Dispensing opioid drugs like popcorn at a movie theater is partially to blame for the epidemic of deadly overdoses that has gripped this country in the last several years. Dr. Choy's irresponsible and illegal actions caused the deaths of two of his patients. The prison term ordered by the Court is more than warranted and should serve as a warning to others - whether they be physicians or street dealers - if you distribute deadly drugs you will be caught and you will be prosecuted."

"The gravity of Dr. Choy's crimes was no doubt the reason why he fled New York in 2017; but justice prevailed with today's sentencing of seven years in prison," said DEA Special Agent in Charge Ray Donovan. "This sentence is also a reminder of the dangers prescription drugs pose when they are not prescribed for a legitimate reason under legitimate medical supervision. I commend the DEA Strike Force and the Office of the Special Narcotics Prosecutor for their diligent work on this investigation."

Police Commissioner James P. O'Neill said, "The opioid crisis demands our highly-focused attention and I commend the members of the New York Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Strike Force, New York City's Special Narcotics Prosecutor, and all the investigators and attorneys who worked on this important case. Together with all of our law-enforcement partners, we are relentlessly working to bring to justice those who seek to profit from the proliferation of opioids and other illegal narcotics."

"The opioid crisis is a national plague that currently claims the lives of thousands of our citizens every year," said Peter Fitzhugh, Special Agent in Charge HSI New York City. "This doctor used a position of trust to recklessly feed the addictions of patients across state lines, resulting in deaths and destroyed lives. This is another great example of various law enforcement agencies working in tandem to arrest an individual causing great harm to the community."

New York State Police Superintendent Keith M. Corlett said, "Physicians take an oath to help their patients, not to harm them, and as such, they should be held to a higher standard. Dr. Choy used the trust of his patients to profit financially by illegally selling prescription drugs. He had no regard for his patients or their well-being, and he put them and the community he served at risk. I commend the hard work of the Strike Force and all of our law enforcement partners for bringing this man to justice. The

work they do is vital to keeping drugs off our streets and in turn, helps to prevent the cycle of prescription drug abuse.”

The case was prosecuted by Assistant District Attorney Brian Rodriguez, under the supervision of Assistant District Attorney Tess Cohen, Chief of the Prescription Drug Investigation Unit for the Special Narcotics Prosecutor’s Office. Investigative Analyst Jacquelyn MacMurray and members of the Investigators Unit and the Digital Forensics Unit assisted in the investigation and prosecution.

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 Resources Administration 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 U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) New York Division, the New York City Police Department (NYPD), Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) New York City, 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 | SENTENCE |
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| Lawrence Choy Sheboygan, WI 9/15/52 | Manslaughter 2 nd – 2 cts (2 1/3 - 7 years) Reckless Endangerment 2 nd – 5 cts (1 year) Criminal Sale of a Prescription for a Controlled Substance – 27 cts (3 1/2 years) |