

Office of the Special Narcotics Prosecutor for the City of New York

Bridget G. Brennan, Special Narcotics Prosecutor

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Manhattan physician charged with illegally selling Xanax prescriptions and pills over four years

Up to \$4.6 million in addictive anti-anxiety medication funnelled onto black market

Bridget G. Brennan, New York City's Special Narcotics Prosecutor, and New York City Police Commissioner William J. Bratton announced today the arrest and indictment of Dr. MENGJIA ZHAO on charges he illegally sold 28 prescriptions for alprazolam, an addictive medication commonly sold under the brand name Xanax, which is used to treat anxiety. The doctor is also charged with selling the pills themselves on five occasions.

ZHAO, an internist who has been licensed to practice medicine in the U.S. for 20 years, was arrested late last night at John F. Kennedy International Airport. The arrest is the result of a long-term investigation by the Office of the Special Narcotics Prosecutors Prescription Drug Investigation Unit and the New York City Police Department's (NYPD) Narcotics Borough Manhattan South.

During a search of ZHAO's home at 71 Piquets Lane in Woodbury, Long Island, on July 14 police seized jewelry and financial documents. Police also conducted a court authorized search of ZHAO's office at 109 Lafayette Street in Manhattan and seized medical records, bank records, blank prescription pads, stamps bearing Dr. ZHAO's name and several pill bottles.

An indictment charges ZHAO with 28 counts of Criminal Sale of a Prescription for a Controlled Substance and five counts of Criminal Sale of a Controlled Substance in the Fifth Degree. He is expected to be arraigned this morning in Manhattan Supreme Court before Judge Neil Ross, Part 23, 100 Centre St., 13th floor.

The investigation was initiated in 2011 after NYPD officers developed information that multiple drug dealers who sold alprazolam in Manhattan's Union Square had obtained the medication through prescriptions written by ZHAO. During the probe, undercover NYPD officers visited ZHAO's medical practice at 109 Lafayette Street on more than two dozen occasions. During these appointments, ZHAO allegedly failed to conduct medical examinations beyond checking the undercover officers' blood pressure. Instead ZHAO illegally sold 28 prescriptions for alprazolam to the undercover officers in exchange for payments which purported to be medical fees.

ZHAO initially charged a \$100 cash fee for the first visit by each of the undercover officers and \$70 cash for subsequent visits. By 2014, the rate for subsequent visits was raised to \$80.

On five occasions, ZHAO also sold the actual alprazolam pills in quantities ranging from three to 100 tablets at a time, which doctors are not legally permitted to do. This occurred when undercover officers returned to ZHAO's office before an earlier prescription was due to be refilled. Rather than write overlapping prescriptions, which could trigger scrutiny by the New York State Department of Health's Prescription Monitoring Program, ZHAO instead sold the officers a total of 246 alprazolam pills.

A court authorized analysis of ZHAO's prescribing history revealed that 48% of the prescriptions ZHAO wrote between 2009 and 2015 were for alprazolam – typically for 60 to 90 pills at 2 mg strength. Given his rate structure, ZHAO could have collected approximately \$800,000 for these prescriptions. The high rate of prescriptions for a single type of anti-anxiety drug was notable because ZHAO is an internist rather than a psychiatrist.

The investigation revealed that ZHAO ignored signs that patients were addicted to alprazolam and/or selling the medication, which carries a street value of \$5 per pill. ZHAO allegedly continued prescribing alprazolam after the undercover officers told him that they were also obtaining the medication on the street.

Alprazolam, or Xanax, is a type of benzodiazepine, which is a family of depressants generally prescribed to treat anxiety and sleep disorders. Heavy use of benzodiazepines, or use in combination with other depressants, such as heroin and prescription opioid painkillers, can slow the heart rate and breathing enough to cause death. The vast majority of overdose deaths involve more than one substance.

Fatal drug overdoses in the New York City increased by 41% between 2010 and 2013, according to the most recent data available from the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH). Benzodiazepines were found in 60% of overdose deaths involving opioid painkillers, 36% of deaths involving heroin, and 58% of deaths involving methadone in 2013.

Special Narcotics Prosecutor Bridget G. Brennan thanked her office's Prescription Drug Investigation Unit, the New York City Police Department, and the New York State Health Department's Bureau of Narcotic Enforcement for their work on this case.

Special Narcotics Prosecutor Bridget G. Brennan stated, "Preventing illegally obtained prescription pills from hitting the black market is critically important to protecting the public's health and safety. Xanax used improperly can be fatal. We will continue to vigorously prosecute the few medical professionals who wreak so much havoc by selling their access to addictive prescription medications for a profit."

"This doctor allegedly sold prescriptions and pills, providing easy access to individuals who were not medically in need but were willing to pay a fee to obtain the drugs. Thanks to the work of the investigators of Narcotics Borough Manhattan South, this illegal prescription supply has been shut down." said New York City Police Commissioner William J. Bratton.

INDICTED DEFENDANT

CHARGES

Mengjia Zhao
71 Piquets Lane
Woodbury, NY
1/17/1954

Criminal Sale of a Prescription for a Controlled
Substance – 28 cts
CSCS 5th – 5 cts

The charges and allegations are merely accusations and the defendant is presumed innocent until proven guilty.