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State suspends psychiatrist's license

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Prominent Virginia psychiatrist Dr. Carl Robert Showalter had his license suspended yesterday after seven male patients told state officials they were made to masturbate — sometimes with the doctor's assistance — as part of an unconventional, unapproved treatment he called "masturbation therapy."

One patient, Scott Mandeville of Fredericksburg, said he was a suicidal 16-year-old when he sought psychiatric treatment from Showalter for depression in 1973. Almost 25 years later, Mandeville says he is still struggling with the emotional damage caused by those sessions.

Showalter practices at Rockingham Memorial Hospital and James Madison University Health Center in Harrisonburg. He also is known throughout the state as a psychiatric expert witness who frequently testifies for the prosecution in criminal cases.

Showalter's medical license was indefinitely suspended yesterday by the state Board of Medicine. But under an agreement, Showalter could be allowed to return to work on a restricted basis in as little as three months.

The findings of fact entered by the board detailed the experiences of the seven patients who sought treatment from Showalter between 1969 and 1988. They said Showalter had them undress, then got them to masturbate, sometimes with his help. In at least one case, Showalter took Polaroid photos of a nude patient, the findings said.

Showalter did not attend yesterday's meeting. But his lawyer, John S. West, offered a statement by Showalter that apologized to former patients "who believe they were harmed by my treatment of them."

Showalter also wrote, "I do not dispute the board's finding that the treatment I used was an unproven and experimental treatment modality that never gained widespread acceptance. . . . At the time, society and medical science had very different views than they do now about the treatment approaches to [sexual] issues. Because those views have changed dramatically, I stopped using this form of therapy more than 10 years ago."

Mandeville said he refused to continue the sessions with Showalter after about six

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Psychiatrist agrees to punishment

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months, but he wasn't able to talk about it until years later.

"There's the shame, the humiliation, and the secrets. You can't tell anyone. . . . Are you going to tell your dad? My dad was a World War II veteran. He was as macho as they come," Mandeville said in an interview before the proceeding.

The board's records say that, in addition to having his patient masturbate, Showalter permitted Mandeville "to smoke marijuana during the therapy session" on at least one occasion.

The case was settled without a formal hearing, and Showalter agreed to the punishment of indefinite suspension. However, the "consent order" signed yesterday specifically states that Showalter "neither admits nor denies the truth" of the findings of fact.

As the board discussed whether to accept the settlement agreement, one board member wondered why the consent order contained no statement from Showalter saying that he is no longer engaging in those practices.

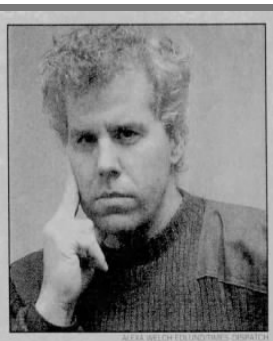
Assistant Attorney General Frank Pedrotty, who represented the commonwealth in the case, replied that "if you say you are no longer doing it, you open yourself up to civil liability" if any of the victims try to sue for damages.

West said he could say on his client's behalf that Showalter no longer engages in masturbation therapy.

The consent order specifies that, after three months, Showalter may petition the board for a stay of his suspension, provided he submits to a comprehensive psychiatric evaluation and complies with the evaluators' recommendations.

If the board is satisfied with the evaluation and assured that Showalter is "safe to return to the practice of medicine," his practice will be limited to managing patients' medications and taking psychiatric histories of patients at Rockingham Memorial Hospital and the JMU Health Center — but he will be required to have a chaperone present at all times during his treatment of patients. The director of the Rockingham hospital wrote a letter of support to the board asking that Showalter be allowed to resume working at the hospital after three months, Pedrotty said.

After one year, if Showalter wants his license restored, he would have to go back to the board and prove that he is "no longer a danger" to patients, Pedrotty said.



ALEXA WELCH FOLLIN/TIMES-DISPATCH

EX-PATIENT. Scott Mandeville says he still bears emotional scars from being treated by Dr. Carl Showalter 24 years ago.

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