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Psychiatrist pleads guilty to charges

Action means permanent loss of medical license

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ROANOKE — A prominent Harrisonburg psychiatrist whose medical license was suspended last year after he made male patients masturbate in front of him pleaded guilty yesterday to overbilling insurers.

The guilty plea agreement ensures that Dr. Carl Robert Showalter, 60, will never regain his medical license, a fact that caused several of his former patients to react with joy outside the U.S. District Court room yesterday.

"I've waited 26 years for justice, and I'm certainly feeling a lot better today than I did a year ago when the state Board of Medicine slapped him on the wrist," said Scott Mandeville, 41, of Stafford County. "I think the justice system does work occasionally."

Mandeville, who had sought psychiatric treatment from Showalter in 1973, was one of seven former patients who told the Board of Medicine in February 1998 that they were made to masturbate, sometimes with the doctor's assistance, as part of an unconventional treatment Showalter called "masturbation therapy."

Showalter, known throughout the state as an expert witness for the defense in criminal cases, practiced psychiatry at Rockingham Memorial Hospital and James Madison University Health Center in Harrisonburg.

Robert Flory, 46, of Harrisonburg and a patient of Showalter's between 1971 and 1978, said seeing the doctor plead guilty to mail fraud was "rewarding," but added that he won't be fully satisfied until Showalter is sent to prison.

"I hope he does jail time," Flory said. "What they were able to convict him on was so small considering the incredible harm he has done over the years."

Flory said he has suffered emotionally over the years after Showalter's masturbation therapy.

Showalter faces a fine of up to $250,000 and up to five years in prison. A sentencing date has not yet been scheduled.

In court yesterday, under questioning by Assistant U.S. Attorney Karen Peters, Showalter admitted to overbilling insurers in 1997. According to the government's case, Showalter would see patients for a few minutes and prescribe medication, but would bill patients' insurers for therapy sessions lasting 30 to 55 minutes.

As part of his plea agreement, Showalter agreed to reimburse the insurers $26,111. He also agreed not to try to regain his medical license. In exchange for the guilty plea, Peters agreed not to object if Showalter asks a judge for an alternative to prison, such as house arrest.

The investigation into Showalter's billing practices touched off the Board of Medicine's examination of his odd therapy program. While searching the doctor's office for billing records, a special agent with the U.S. Department of Defense found Polaroid photos and a videotape of young men masturbating. In one of the photos, Showalter's degree was visible on a wall in the background.

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