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Evidence of unproven sex treatment also found

Psychiatrist pleads guilty to fraud

The 60-year-old man forfeits his medical license and faces 5 years in prison and a $250,000 fine.

By MICHAEL HEMPHILL
THE ROANOKE TIMES

A prominent Virginia psychiatrist, whose medical license was suspended last year over allegations he made male patients masturbate in his office — sometimes with his help — as part of an unproven treatment, now faces prison time after he pleaded guilty Wednesday to health care fraud in federal court in Roanoke.

Practicing in Harrisonburg, Dr. Carl Robert Showalter gained attention in the Roanoke Valley when he testified in a 1992 criminal trial for the defense that a man who had shot to death his estranged wife suffered from "spousal homicide syndrome." In 1994, he testified for a Vietnam veteran who claimed his post-traumatic stress disorder caused him to kill a Roanoke man.

Showalter's downfall began in the spring 1996, when a patient complained to health care officials that Showalter charged for a nonexistent psychotherapy session.

A subsequent undercover operation, which featured a federal agent posing as a stressed-out man with marital problems, disclosed several illegal billing practices, an investigator testified Wednesday. Specifically, Showalter billed at a higher rate for his psychiatric services for sessions that were actually done by a lesser trained, and less expensive, counselor.

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Another troubling aspect of this case came to light, however, when authorities executed a search warrant and found in Showalter's desk drawer Polaroid pictures and videotapes of teenage boys masturbating in his office. These materials were turned over to the state Board of Medicine.

Last February, seven former male patients came forward and told the board that as teen-agers they had been victims of Showalter's unconventional, unapproved treatment he practiced from 1969 to 1988 called "masturbation therapy," in which he sometimes assisted them.

In a letter to the board, Showalter admitted he used the treatment, saying, "At the time, society and medical science had very different views than they do now about the treatment approaches to [sexual] issues."

The board suspended his license for one year, but left open the possibility he could seek reinstatement in February.

Under Wednesday's plea agreement, however, the 60-year-old man forfeits his license and can never reapply for it. He must also reimburse health care plans of the $26,111 he fraudulently billed. He faces up to five years in prison and a $250,000 fine when he is formally sentenced.

"I've waited 26 years for justice," said Scott Mandeville, a 41-year-old Stafford County man who traveled to Roanoke for the hearing. "I'm actually feeling a little better today than a year ago when the Board of Medicine slapped him on the wrist."

Michael Hemphill can be reached at 981-3336 or michaelh@roanoke.com

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