

Tenn. psychiatrist found guilty of distributing 1,200 opioid pills to three sisters

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Kim Bellware

A Tennessee psychiatrist who prescribed more than 1,200 pills to three sisters over a three-year period was found guilty in federal court Friday of distributing powerful opioid painkillers without "legitimate medical purpose," according to a statement from the Justice Department.

Farmer was accused of exchanging prescriptions for drugs such as Oxycodone and Alprazolam - known under brand names such as OxyContin and Xanax, respectively - for "sexual favors and the companionship of female patients."

The verdict against Richard Farmer, 83, marks the first conviction for a federal strike force formed in 2018 to crack down on illegal opioid prescriptions in the Appalachia region amid the federal government's sometimes-controversial effort to stem the opioid epidemic through prosecution.

"Doctors who take advantage of patients suffering from addiction are no different than street corner drug dealers," Special Agent in Charge Todd Scott of the Drug Enforcement Administration's (DEA) Louisville Division Office said in a Friday statement.

Farmer, who practiced in Memphis, was arrested in 2019 as part of a raid by the Appalachian Regional Prescription Opioid Strike Force, or ARPO, a multiagency effort that includes the Justice Department and Department of Health and Human Services. The sting led to the arrest of 14 other health-care professionals in western Tennessee, including doctors, nurse practitioners and pharmacists.

Several details in Farmer's case remain sealed, and the U.S. attorneys office in western Tennessee declined to comment on the case beyond its news release. According to the federal indictment, Farmer was accused of exchanging prescriptions for drugs such as Oxycodone and Alprazolam - known under brand names such as OxyContin and Xanax, respectively - for "sexual favors and the companionship of female patients."

Despite the DOJ noting the charge in its announcement of Farmer's conviction, his attorney Charles Mitchell told The Washington Post that the jury did not find Farmer guilty of having sex with the three related patients; he noted that it was among the six counts jurors acquitted him of or deadlocked on, along with the accusation that he provided drugs to the women's friends and neighbors without seeing them in a clinical setting.

Prosecutors said Farmer did not keep patient files on the two sisters and their sister-in-law and ignored basic professional and ethical practices, such as drug screening his patients before prescribing them powerful opioids and ignoring signs of addiction.

In one case, Farmer prescribed the drugs to a woman while she was pregnant as well as before and after her pregnancy despite there being no medical necessity for the drugs in her case.

"The defense maintained throughout that these were patients at Dr. Farmer's clinic. These patients presented with legitimate medical issues and it appears that the jury convicted on the theory that Dr. Farmer, a psychiatrist, was attempting to treat chronic pain in these particular patients," Mitchell said, adding that there are plans to appeal the verdict, but that will come after he faces sentencing May 22.

Farmer's case is the first of its kind to go to jury trial and reach a verdict, but the ARPO strike force has led to 24 guilty pleas in other cases in the region.

Opioids have been a main driver of declining life expectancy among Americans in recent years. A 2019 Washington Post analysis found that painkillers such as oxycodone and fentanyl have led to more than 400,000 U.S. deaths since 2000, with a quarter of those occurring in the past six years as the crisis accelerated.