

A psychiatrist was found guilty of distributing 1,200 painkillers after opioid task force bust

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By Kim Bellware



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

The verdict against Richard Farmer, 83, marks the first conviction for a federal task force formed in 2018 to crack down on illegal opioid prescriptions in the Appalachian 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 J. Todd Scott of the Drug Enforcement Administration’s Louisville Division Office said in a Friday statement.

Farmer, who practiced in East Memphis, was arrested in 2019 as part of a raid by the Appalachian Regional Prescription Opioid Strike Force, 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 West Tennessee, including doctors, nurse practitioners and pharmacists.

Several details in Farmer's case remain sealed as of Friday, and the U.S. attorney's office in West Tennessee declined to comment on the case beyond its news release. According to the federal indictment, Farmer was accused of exchanging prescriptions for drugs like oxycodone and alprazolam — known under brand names like OxyContin and Xanax — for “sexual favors and the companionship of female patients.”

Despite the DOJ noting the charge in announcing Farmer's conviction, Farmer's attorney, Charles Mitchell, told The Washington Post that the jury did not in fact find his client guilty of having sex with the three related patients; he noted 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, like drug screening his patients before prescribing powerful opioids and ignoring signs of addiction.

In one case, Farmer prescribed the drugs to a woman before, during and after her pregnancy despite a lack of medical necessity.

“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. He said an appeal of the verdict will come after sentencing May 22.

Farmer's case is the first to go to jury trial and reach a verdict, but the multiagency opioid strike force has struck 24 guilty pleas in other cases around 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 like oxycodone and fentanyl have led to more than 400,000 U.S. deaths since 2000, with a quarter of those occurring in just the past six years as the crisis accelerated.