

Public Health: transplant surgeon indicted for queue jumping

Dr. Richard R. Lopez Jr., 54, was the director of the liver transplant scheme at St. Vincent Medical Centre in Los Angeles, USA. He has been indicted by a federal grand jury for lying to the national organ transplant network after a liver accepted on behalf of one patient was instead transplanted into another patient who was significantly lower on the national wait list.

Lopez who lives in the Cheviot Hills area of West Los Angeles, was named in an eight-count indictment that accuses him of conspiracy, one count of concealment of a material fact, and six counts of falsification of records in a matter under the jurisdiction of the United States Department of Health and Human Services.

According to the indictment, in September 2003 St. Vincent was offered a liver for a St. Vincent patient, identified as A-H, who ranked second on the match list for that liver, but who was in his home country of Saudi Arabia. The backup patient for the liver was at another local hospital.

Instead of advising the organ procurement organisation of the intended switch and allowing the organ to be offered to the backup patient, Lopez approved acceptance of the liver and its transplantation into another, patient at St. Vincent—a patient identified in the indictment as A-B, who was ranked 52nd on the match list behind nine other St. Vincent patients.

After A-B received the liver, Lopez and his conspirators falsely told authorities at the national organ transplant network that A-H had received the liver, and later submitted a falsified pathology report on A-H's "explanted" (removed) liver.

As a result of the false reporting, A-H was removed from the liver transplant waiting list in September 2003 and was thereafter deprived of the opportunity to have this life-saving operation prosecutors say.

However, Lopez continued to tell A-H that he was on the liver transplant wait list and instructed A-H return to the United States in April 2004, when A-H was found to be too ill to receive a transplant. He subsequently returned to Saudi Arabia, where he later died.

The indictment alleges that in reports filed until 2005 with the authorities operating the national organ transplant network, Lopez and unnamed conspirators continued to maintain the fiction that A-H had received the liver transplant.

In 2005, the switch and cover-up were discovered by senior management at St. Vincent and reported to authorities. Lopez has not been associated with St. Vincent since late 2005. The hospital has fully cooperated with federal authorities since the beginning of the investigation.

Lopez is scheduled to make his initial court appearance in United States District Court in Los Angeles on January 25.

Lopez has not entered a plea.

The FBI is clearly reviewing its options: Steven M. Martinez, Assistant Director in Charge of the FBI's Los Angeles Field Office said "the alleged actions of the defendant directly factored into the death of the rightful organ recipient, who might be alive today had he not been improperly removed from the wait[ing] list."