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Prosecutors Say Doctor Killed To Feel a Thrill

By CHARLIE LEDUFF SEPT. 7, 2000

Most people in the courtroom knew how the small, skittish man had managed to murder at least four of his patients without getting caught: he injected them with poison, he admitted today. The question observers wanted answered was "Why?"

And then prosecutors offered five scrawled pages from the killer's spiral-bound diary as the motive. It seems that Michael J. Swango, a former doctor, killed for the pure joy of watching and smelling death.

Reading from a notebook confiscated from Mr. Swango when he was arrested in a Chicago airport in 1997 on his way to Saudi Arabia, where he had a job in a hospital, prosecutors painted a portrait of a delusional serial killer. The written passages show that Mr. Swango, 45, was a voracious reader of macabre thrillers about doctors who thought they had the power of the Almighty.

In small, tight script, Mr. Swango transcribed a passage from what prosecutors said was "The Torture Doctor," which they described as an obscure true-to-life novel published in 1975 about a 19th-century doctor who goes on a quiet murder spree and tries to poison his wife with succinylcholine chloride, a powerful muscle relaxant.

"He could look at himself in a mirror and tell himself that he was one of the most powerful and dangerous men in the world -- he could feel that he was a god in disguise," the notebook read.

Another of Mr. Swango's favorite books, according to prosecutors, was "The Traveler," written by John Katzenbach. One passage that prosecutors contended offered a window into Mr. Swango's mind was: "when I kill someone, it's because I want to. It's the only way I have of reminding myself that I'm still alive."

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what he identified as the text of "My Secret Life," Mr. Swango was inspired to copy: "I love it. Sweet, husky, close smell of an indoor homicide."

Mr. Brown, on the steps of United States District Court, said today: "Basically, Dr. Swango liked to kill people. By his own admission in his diary, he killed because it thrilled him."

Wearing prison blues and faded slippers, Mr. Swango stood in the courtroom and admitted that he murdered three of his patients at a Long Island hospital with lethal injections.

Each time Judge Jacob Mishler asked Mr. Swango how he pleaded, he answered impassively: "Guilty, your honor."

Accusations, incriminations and death followed Mr. Swango wherever he went, from the time he began medical school at Southern Illinois University in the early 1980's to his tenure as a physician in Zimbabwe. And although an inordinate amount of his patients died over the years -- some officials estimate as many as 60 -- Mr. Swango always managed to find employment.

Prosecutors in New York could charge him only with the three murders in their jurisdiction, committed when he worked for three months as a resident at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Northport in 1993. His victims were Thomas Sammarco, 73; George Siano, 60; and Aldo Serini, 62, all of Long Island. He faced federal, rather than state, charges because those three murders were committed at a federal institution.

And for the first time, Mr. Swango acknowledged today that he killed Cynthia McGee, 19, a student who was in his care at Ohio State University Hospitals in 1984 when he worked there as a resident.

He was not charged with her murder, because it was not a federal crime, but he pleaded guilty to lying about his role in her death, and also to falsifying records about prison time he served in the mid-1980's for poisoning co-workers' coffee and doughnuts with ant poison.

When Judge Mishler asked for an explanation of the death of Mr. Siano, Mr. Swango read from a prepared text. "I intentionally killed Mr. Siano, who was at the time a patient at the veterans' hospital in Northport," he read. "I did this by administering a toxic substance which I knew was likely to cause death. I knew it was

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Not only did Mr. Swango administer the lethal injection to Mr. Siano, prosecutors said, he did it on his day off, a day when he was not even on call. Prosecutors said that a nurse saw Mr. Swango sitting on a radiator near Mr. Siano's bed watching the man die from the lethal dose.

"I'm still shaking my head that a madman got a plea bargain today," said Mr. Siano's stepdaughter, Roselinda Conroy. "He's worse than an animal. Animals don't kill for pleasure."

Judge Mishler sentenced Mr. Swango to three consecutive life sentences, without the possibility of parole, in a maximum-security prison in Colorado.

Mary A. Dowling, director of the hospital in Northport, tried to answer the wider question of how a man with Mr. Swango's background could find employment there.

She said that he was hired by the State University of New York at Stony Brook, and rotated through Northport as part of his Stony Brook residency training.

"Michael Swango failed to truthfully disclose the reason for a prior criminal conviction on his application," Ms. Dowling said, explaining that Mr. Swango had told administrators that his jail time had to do with a barroom brawl. "It was an offense he pled guilty to and for which he served three years in prison."

That explanation was not good enough for the relatives of the dead men. "He left a trail of death wherever he went," Ms. Conroy said. "Because of the gross negligence of these institutions, Swango was allowed to kill. They, too, should be held accountable."

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