5 Years in Prison for Utah Nurse Who Passed On Hep C to Patients

While stealing drugs, the now former health care professional apparently mixed up syringes she had used with those meant for patients.

January 23, 2020 By Benjamin Ryan

In the first federal sentence of its kind, a former Utah nurse has been sentenced to five years in prison for stealing painkillers intended for patients, The Salt Lake Tribune reports. In the process of this theft, the nurse transmitted her hepatitis C virus (HCV) to at least seven patients.

In September, Elet Neilson pleaded guilty to two counts of tampering with a consumer product and two counts of fraudulently obtaining a controlled substance. The plea deal led prosecutors to drop a dozen related charges.

While federal prosecutors had asked U.S. District Judge Dee Benson to sentence Neilson to more than seven years of incarceration out of a potential 10 years, her attorney lobbied for probation.

Neilson told the court that she had begun using prescription painkillers in 2014 during a period of great personal strain. She was getting divorced at the time and while working strenuous overnight shifts as an emergency room nurse was also caring for a son with autism.

She was unaware that she had hep C until the health department called her in 2015 regarding the investigation that ultimately led to her prison sentence. She surrendered her nurse's license in November 2015.

Neilson would fill a pair of syringes with prescription painkillers and use one on a patient while keeping the other for her personal use at home. When she brought those syringes back to the hospital to get more pain medication, she managed to mix them up with the sterile supply and ultimately transmit her hep C to patients.

Although Neilson pleaded guilty to infecting seven patients with HCV, an estimated 16 people contracted the virus from her, according to the Utah Department of Health. Perhaps as many as 4,800 patients were exposed to her virus at the McKay-Dee Hospital in Ogden, where she was employed from June 2013 to November 2014, as were 2,369 patients at the Davis Hospital and Medical Center in Layton, where she was on staff between 2012 and 2014.

To read the Salt Lake Tribune article, click here.

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