

State investigation clears Michael Schiavo of all abuse charges

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In a crushing rebuttal to the hysterical lies spread by the Christian fundamentalist right about the Terri Schiavo case, the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) has released documents on its investigation into complaints of abuse of the brain-damaged woman, showing that charges repeatedly filed against Michael Schiavo over the past four years had no foundation.

The DCF investigated 89 complaints against Michael Schiavo between 2001 and March 2004. Some were made in anonymous phone calls or letters to the DCF, others by Terri Schiavo's parents, Robert and Mary Schindler, who waged a protracted legal battle, supported by the Christian right, against the removal of the feeding tube that kept their daughter alive in a persistent vegetative state.

Additional complaints were filed after March 18, 2005, during the weeks of political frenzy over the disconnection of life support, culminating in Terri Schiavo's death March 31. The DCF has not yet completed its investigation of the most recent complaints, but they largely rehashed the earlier charges that the DCF investigated and completely discredited.

These complaints became the basis for scurrilous attacks on Michael Schiavo on the Internet and on talk radio, Fox TV and other outlets for the fascistic right. Some of these charges were uncritically rehashed in the "liberal" *Village Voice* by the prominent commentator Nat Hentoff.

Schiavo was accused of deliberately neglecting his wife, causing her to lie in filth, refusing to authorize needed medical treatment, injecting her with insulin although she was not diabetic, and even causing her irreparable brain damage in 1990, by beating or strangling her. (The actual cause of the brain damage was oxygen deprivation brought on by a potassium imbalance related to Terri's bulimia.)

The DCF investigators judged all these complaints to be unfounded. Beyond that, they praised Michael Schiavo's conduct, declaring: "the spouse has always been courteous and very compassionate toward his wife" and "all her needs were being met."

This testimony is all the more persuasive, given that the agency functioned under the direction of Florida Governor Jeb Bush, an ally of the Christian right who repeatedly sought to intervene on the side of the Schindlers and against Terri

Schiavo's expressed wish to have life support withdrawn.

Three of the investigations took place in 2001, four in 2003, and two in the first half of 2004. The investigation report dated June 25, 2001 is typical (in the bureaucratic jargon of the DCF, Terri Schiavo is V, for alleged victim of abuse, while Michael Schiavo is PRP, for alleged perpetrator of the abuse):

"PRP has done every possible thing to rehabilitate V, even taking her to specialists as far as California. Nothing has helped improve V's condition. PRP has approved all medical treatments including administration of antibiotics when doctors indicate a need for them. There is no evidence to support allegations of any neglect or abuse."

The largest number of complaints during this three-year period were filed in October 2003, when a state judge approved Michael Schiavo's decision to remove the feeding tube from Terri Schiavo, and the Florida legislature intervened, at Governor Bush's urging, passing special legislation taking custody of Ms. Schiavo and restoring the tube. The law was later ruled unconstitutional by the Florida state Supreme Court.

Complaints filed on October 14, 2003 included charges that Terri Schiavo suffered from untreated bone fractures (supposedly the result of Michael Schiavo beating her), that he had injected her with insulin (allegedly to hasten her death), and that he had repeatedly expressed, in coarse terms, the desire for her to die so he could inherit a trust fund set up to pay her legal and medical expenses.

The DCF report entered December 11, 2003 cited the finding of two physicians, Dr. James Carnahan and Dr. Eugenio Alcazaren, who gave sworn affidavits that a bone scan of Terri Schiavo showed "an indication of heterotrophic ossification, not trauma." The report continued: "Both physicians indicated that it was common for patients such as Mrs. Schiavo, suffering from degenerative bone loss and heterotrophic ossification, to sustain fractures from being turned or from physical therapy."

The report also noted that, contrary to wild allegations, Terri's blood sugar showed "no changes" after visits from Michael Schiavo. "The documentation reviewed indicates there have been no abnormally low glucose levels of Mrs. Schiavo in nine years, nor has she been experiencing any seizures or changes in her neurological conditions."

As to the foulest slanders retailed by the Schindlers and the

Christian right, the DCF found: “There is no supporting documentation that the spouse ever made statements about ‘Is the bitch ever going to die,’ or ‘When will the bitch die because I will be rich.’ The staff involved with her care stated the spouse is always courteous and rarely alone with the patient.”

The charge that Terri’s dental care was being neglected was also investigated. According to the DCF report, “the attending physician, Dr. Gambone, stated that a routine dental exam and X rays would cause major distress to Mrs. Schiavo and would require extraordinary measures to accomplish such as sedation and lift equipment and she could suffer from aspiration.... Mrs. Schiavo does receive oral care and cleaning and to date there are no known problems such as abscesses, bleeding gums, or caries.”

These findings underscore the depraved character of the right-wing groups attacking Michael Schiavo. In many cases, the measures being advocated—dental examinations for a woman who could not swallow, for instance, or physical therapy for a patient made brittle by years of vegetative existence—would have been positively injurious.

The December 11, 2003 report concluded by stating the facts about the supposed financial interest of Michael Schiavo in his wife’s demise: “Mr. Schiavo was appointed plenary guardian in 1990, with total assets of \$20,900. In Oct. 1992, he turned over the finances to Barnett Bank Trust Co. and total assets listed at \$139,000. In April, 1993, Southtrust Estate and Trust Co. took over and assets listed \$776,254.89. In July, 2002, Ms. Carpenter was appointed guardian of finances and the information on assets is sealed by the court.... Mr. Schiavo has not controlled the finances since 1992, and all payments were court approved.”

A second DCF investigation from late in 2003, based on a complaint filed October 24, 2003, rebutted claims that the area where the feeding tube entered Terri Schiavo’s stomach was infected. It noted that the complainant “stated that her information on current state of infection and lack of treatment was from Yahoo chat line. Reporter stated that she has no personal knowledge of infection and victim’s lack of treatment.” The investigators found: “Victim’s feeding tube area does have a little drainage. It is not infected.”

The DCF document concluded: “During the time Mrs. Schiavo has been a patient of hospice, the spouse has always been courteous and very compassionate towards his wife. They have never heard him make any statements pertaining to wanting her to die. He is rarely alone with her when he visits and he has never compromised her care.”

In March-April 2004, there were a series of complaints after a purple plastic object was found on the floor of Schiavo’s hospice room by her parents, who claimed that it was a “needle top” that proved their daughter was being secretly injected. The DCF investigated, and reported that the attendant who cleaned the room had testified it was not on the floor before the parents

visited, that the mother carried a purse, and that she emerged from the room with the alleged “evidence.” Terri Schiavo was examined but no injection site or drug was detected.

Additional complaints charged that Terri was missing a tooth, had a bedsore, and was not being bathed or turned in bed. A DCF investigation concluded that Terri was clean and washed, and had a small external ulcer which had been treated and healed before the complaint was phoned to the agency’s hot-line. The hospice had also agreed to the “purchase of a new bed which automatically will turn the V every 20 minutes to preclude skin breakdown or her body being in one position too long.”

Michael Schiavo’s attorney Hamden Baskin III, in a comment to the *Orlando Sentinel*, said the DCF documents were a refutation of the agency’s own decision, on two occasions, to seek to take custody of Terri Schiavo away from her husband. “From the get-go, this was nothing but a political intervention,” he said. “There was and continues to be no reason for them to have been involved.”

The findings of the Florida DCF demonstrate that the right-wing campaign against Michael Schiavo was based on deliberate lies which were spread on the Internet, through right-wing talk radio and by leading Republican congressional leaders. Among these was House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, who publicly derided Michael Schiavo for his decision to terminate life support for his brain-damaged wife, even though DeLay authorized the same painful step in the case of his own dying father.

The cynicism and barefaced slanders employed in this campaign demonstrate the methods employed by the Bush administration and the extreme right in every sphere of political life. They lie just as readily and crudely about Iraq, the “war on terror” and their plans to destroy Social Security as in the tragic case of Terri Schiavo.



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