

Ohio prisoner suffers horrific death in botched execution

Nick Barrickman
17 January 2014

An execution carried out Thursday morning, using an experimental two-drug mixture, resulted in 53-year-old Ohio death row inmate Dennis McGuire writhing in agony for 25 minutes before being pronounced dead.

McGuire's lawyers last week sought to halt the execution. They argued that the use of an untried lethal combination of drugs could lead to a medical condition known as "air hunger" and cause McGuire to suffer "agony and terror" while struggling to breathe. That is apparently what happened, as the prisoner made loud snorting noises before finally succumbing.

At a January 12 hearing on the new execution procedure, the state's expert, Dr. Mark Dershwitz, said, "I truly don't know how many minutes it will take the inmate to stop breathing." He added, "There is no science to guide me on exactly how long this is going to take."

In opposing the prisoner's motion, Assistant Ohio Attorney General Thomas Madden argued that while the US Constitution bans cruel and unusual punishment, "you're not entitled to a pain-free execution."

US District Judge Gregory Frost ruled in favor of the state, allowing the execution to go forward as scheduled.

Allen Bohnert, McGuire's public defender, called the convicted man's execution a "failed, agonizing experiment," and added, "The people of the state of Ohio should be appalled at what was done here today in their name."

McGuire had been on death row for several decades after being found guilty in the 1989 rape and murder of 22-year-old Joy Stewart. The victim was pregnant at the time of the attack. He was recently denied a stay of execution by Republican Governor John Kasich. McGuire's lawyers argued that the prisoner had been

mentally, physically and sexually abused as a child and had impaired brain function.

Authorities suspect that the cause of the botched procedure was the state's decision to use a two-drug serum consisting of midazolam, a sedative, and hydromorphone, a painkiller. The standard three-drug combination of potassium chloride, pancuronium bromide and pentobarbital had been discontinued by the state after drug manufacturers began refusing to provide substances used for executions.

Witnesses said that after the initial dosage was given, no visible motion from McGuire could be noted until, after ten minutes had passed, he began making "several loud snorting or snoring sounds." He was pronounced dead at 10:53 a.m.

A local reporter said McGuire's family, present at the procedure, was "crying and visibly upset." Amber McGuire, the daughter, cried out, "Oh my god," as her father writhed in his final moments.

Ohio has five more executions scheduled this year, with the next set for February 19.

Nearly all 32 US states that administer the death penalty rely on lethal drug combinations for executions. "In the old three-drug combination, each drug was being used for what it was designed for," said Dr. Jonathan Groner, a lethal injections expert who teaches clinical surgery at Ohio State University, speaking to the *Nation* magazine. "Ohio is taking drugs that are normally used for things like a colonoscopy, and they're giving massive overdoses to kill people. They're using them for their toxic side effects," he added.

There are 138 inmates on death row in Ohio. Despite a general decline in the number of people being put to death by authorities across the US, Ohio has increased its use of capital punishment. Its six executions in 2013

and six planned for this year are surpassed only by Texas and Florida.

The first four US executions this year are all employing never-before-tried compounds. Last week in Oklahoma, Michael Lee Wilson was quoted by newspapers as exclaiming, “I feel my whole body burning,” as he was administered the fatal mixture that ended his life.

Republican Senator Bruce Burns of Wyoming in a comment to the press this week said he would propose legislation to re-introduce firing squads as a means of execution.

Fueling these fascistic sentiments is an effort by states to find cheaper ways of administering lethal drugs to prisoners. Many states have turned to using federally unregulated compounding pharmacies to mix their concoctions. Ohio had reportedly purchased its drugs from one such vendor.

The proper response to the atrocity committed Thursday in Ohio is to criminally prosecute and convict all of the state officials responsible for McGuire’s execution, and to impeach and prosecute the federal judge who denied the prisoner’s motion for a stay of execution.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact