

State killing machine resumes in US

Executions in Georgia, Missouri and Florida

Kate Randall
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Three executions were carried within a 24-hour period Tuesday and Wednesday. The three condemned inmates—Marcus Wellons in Georgia, John Winfield in Missouri and John Henry in Florida—were the first to be put to death in the US since the April 29 state killing of Clayton Lockett in Oklahoma, who suffered for 43 minutes during his lethal injection procedure before dying of cardiac arrest.

Marcus Wellons, 59, was pronounced dead at 11:56 p.m. Tuesday in Georgia after the US Supreme Court denied his final appeal. After being injected with a high dose of pentobarbital, there was little movement visible as the prisoner lay on the gurney. He was seen to exhale several times before his body seemed to quiver and then lie still.

Wellons was convicted in 1993 for the rape and murder of his 15-year old neighbor India Roberts. Wellons' attorneys sought to block the execution, arguing that Georgia's excessive secrecy surrounding the source of its drug supplies for lethal injection was a violation of his constitutional rights. On Monday, the Georgia Board of Pardons and Paroles denied his clemency bid.

Attorneys for Wellons had filed an emergency appeal with the 11th US Circuit Court of Appeals to stop the execution to give them time to gather "relevant information" to evaluate the quality of the compounded sedative that was to be used to put him to death.

Wellons' attorneys argued that the only way to be sure that the compounded pentobarbital made specifically for Wellons' lethal injection was safe was to know who made it and their credentials, and that otherwise Wellons was at risk of a painful death.

Last year, the state of Georgia introduced a new law that declared the identity of anyone involved in the execution process—including both the pharmacies that

supply the drugs and the medical team that administers them—a "confidential state secret."

The secrecy law was upheld last month by the Georgia Supreme Court. In the court's opinion, Justice Harris Hines wrote that the reasons for this extreme privacy are "obvious," arguing that it serves to avoid harassment by the family of condemned prisoners of the execution team and suppliers of the lethal drugs. Justice Hines added ludicrously that the "most obvious party in need of protection" is the executioner.

Georgia and other states have scrambled to find lethal injection drugs as supplies have continued to dry up in the US. In 2011, the drug company Hospira ceased production of sodium thiopental—the anesthetic previously used in Georgia's lethal injection process—following an anti-death-penalty campaign aimed at pharmaceuticals. Hospira had been the leading US supplier of the drug.

States, including Georgia, then turned to Europe-based drug companies to procure the anesthetic and other drugs. However, the European Union soon issued a ban on the export of drugs to be used in lethal injections in the US. Eager to keep the state's killing machine going, Georgia began illegally importing sodium thiopental from Dream Pharma, a pharmaceutical wholesaler operating out of a driving school in Acton, west London.

Later in 2011, the federal Drug Enforcement Administration seized Georgia's entire stock of sodium thiopental. The state has now turned to a single-dose of pentobarbital for its executions. Attorneys for Marcus Wellons challenged the constitutionality of the state's law in keeping this source secret.

In Missouri, John Winfield, 46, was put to death early Wednesday morning after a federal circuit court lifted a stay that had temporarily halted the execution. Winfield

was convicted of shooting his former girlfriend and killing two of her friends in 1996. The ex-girlfriend, Carmelita Donald, survived but was blinded.

Winfield's execution was temporarily stayed June 12 by a federal judge who said there was evidence state officials intimidated a prison employee who planned to support his clemency bid. Earlier, a juror at Winfield's trial had submitted an affidavit saying she was pressured to switch her sentencing vote from life in prison to death.

The *Guardian* newspaper, along with four other news outlets, are challenging in court Missouri's insistence on secrecy over its lethal injection supplies. The suit claims that the state is acting against the First Amendment right of the people to have access to information on essential government procedures.

The executions in Georgia and Missouri were the first since the gruesome state killing of Clayton Lockett, 38, in Oklahoma. Some 51 minutes after being strapped to the execution gurney, Lockett was injected in his groin with a three-drug cocktail of midazolam, veruconium bromide and potassium chloride.

Within minutes of the injection, he began twitching violently and the curtains were drawn to obscure the view of witnesses. Prison authorities then reportedly called off the execution. Some 43 minutes later reporters were told that Lockett had died of a massive heart attack.

At a media conference following his death, Oklahoma Department of Corrections Director Robert Patton claimed that Lockett's veins "exploded" during the execution. A preliminary autopsy performed by forensic pathologist May 14 revealed that this was apparently not the case. Rather, the unidentified individuals carrying out the gruesome process did it improperly.

The autopsy found that despite the fact that Lockett had "excellent integrity of peripheral and deep veins for the purpose of achieving venous access," those administering the lethal chemicals were unable to properly inject them. The report noted "the presence of superficial and deep subcutaneous hemorrhages indicative of attempted vascular access for administration of fluids and medications."

Oklahoma officials would later admit that Lockett also had been tasered prior to the execution when he refused to leave his cell to march to the execution

chamber.

In another horrific execution on January 16, Dennis McGuire, 53, was put to death in Ohio. McGuire's family members watched in horror as an untested, lethal cocktail of two drugs were injected into his veins. He writhed in pain before being pronounced dead 25 minutes later by prison authorities.

The death penalty still exists in 32 of the 50 US states, although executions have only been carried out in 10 of these states in recent years. The difficulties in procuring deadly chemicals, and the controversy over the lethal injection procedure, have some states seeking alternative methods for sending prisoners to their deaths. Lawmakers in Wyoming and Utah have called for reintroduction of the firing squad.

In Louisiana, prisons chief James LeBlanc recently urged the state to consider the use of nitrogen asphyxiation as a more "humane" execution technique. In this "modern" version of the gas chamber, the condemned individual would be sealed in an airtight chamber pumped full of nitrogen gas, causing death by lack of oxygen.



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