

Missouri carries out seventh execution of 2014

Kate Randall
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Michael Worthington was executed by the state of Missouri just after midnight on Wednesday. Worthington, 43, was convicted and sentenced to death for the 1995 murder of Melinda “Mindy” Griffin during a burglary of her home.

Both the US Supreme Court and Missouri Governor Jay Nixon, a Democrat, declined to block the execution. Worthington’s lethal injection was the first execution in the US since the horrifically prolonged execution of Joseph Wood on July 23 in Arizona.

Worthington’s attorneys had cited the Arizona execution and two others that went terribly wrong in Ohio and Oklahoma earlier this year, as well as the secrecy surrounding the lethal execution drugs used in Missouri, in arguing for the execution to be stopped. Worthington commented Tuesday before he was put to death, “I’m just accepting of whatever’s going to happen because I have no choice. The courts don’t seem to care about what’s right or wrong anymore.”

In Arizona on July 23, it took close to two hours to execute Joseph Wood. A review by the state has revealed that it took 15 doses of lethal chemicals to kill him, during which time the inmate was gasping and moving on the execution gurney. The state utilizes a two-drug protocol of midazolam, a sedative, and hydromorphone, a painkiller.

Records released by the state on August 1 to Wood’s attorneys show he was administered each of the two drugs 15 times in 50-milligram increments, for a total of 750 milligrams of each drug. He gasped more than 600 times while he lay on the gurney before finally being pronounced dead after an hour and 52 minutes.

Claims by Arizona officials that Wood was “brain dead” during his nearly two-hour execution, and therefore did not suffer, have been disputed by prominent medical experts. David Waisel, associate professor of anesthesia at Harvard Medical School, said a person who is brain dead will stop breathing unless

kept alive by a ventilator.

“There is no way anyone could ever look at someone and make that kind of diagnosis,” Waisel said. “He was still breathing, so he was not brain dead. This is an example where they threw out a term that has a precise medical definition, but they didn’t know what it means.”

In another ghastly execution, this time in Ohio, Dennis McGuire, 53, was executed on January 16 by lethal injection with the same two-drug protocol. Family members watched in horror as he writhed in pain before being pronounced dead by prison authorities 25 minutes after the deadly procedure began.

On April 29 in Oklahoma, Clayton Lockett, 38, reacted violently, kicking and grimacing, while lifting his head off the gurney after being injected with a three-drug protocol including midazolam hydrochloride. He was pronounced dead 43 minutes after the process began, having died of an apparent massive heart attack.

In an effort to keep their killing machines in operation, states that practice the death penalty, including Missouri, have turned to compounding pharmacies to produce versions of pentobarbital and other execution drugs. These chemicals have been in short supply since European drug companies have stopped exporting their products to the US for use in executions.

Missouri and Texas, which have each carried out seven executions so far this year, are among the states that have turned to such pharmacies.

State authorities’ refusal to name their drug suppliers has prompted condemned inmates to mount legal challenges to their executions. Legal challenges have raised the Eighth Amendment to the US Constitution, which prohibits cruel and unusual punishment. Death row inmates have also contended that the refusal of authorities to provide detailed information on the

protocols violates First Amendment rights.

The decision of Missouri to proceed with Michael Worthington's execution after the gruesome execution in Arizona—and the refusal of the US Supreme Court to stop it—indicate the determination at all levels of government and the judiciary to keep the death penalty machine alive.

Twenty-seven death row prisoners have been sent to their deaths so far this year, and 15 more executions are planned. Twenty executions have been scheduled for 2015, and another two are already planned in 2016.

Since the US Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976 after a brief hiatus, 1,387 individuals have been executed in the US. These have included those convicted of crimes committed as juveniles, the mentally ill and disabled, and foreign nationals denied their consular rights.



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