

Nevada and Nebraska move to use powerful opioid in state executions

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In a move as twisted as it is cruel, state governments in Nebraska and Nevada are planning to execute death row inmates by opioid overdose. Through the use of fentanyl, a powerful synthetic painkiller 50 times more potent than morphine that has been linked to a substantial number of drug overdoses throughout the US, government officials will find a tried-and-tested killer already available on the market.

Working-class communities have been flooded with lethal drugs, with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention calculating that as many as 52,000 died from overdoses in 2015, a substantial proportion of them from fentanyl. Now the same drug is to be employed to kill predominantly working-class prisoners on Death Row, with the state government taking on the role of the drug dealers.

The lethal protocol is to be tried out on Scott Dozier, 47, of Nevada. Dozier was convicted of killing a man in 2002 in a drug deal gone sour and mutilating his corpse. In Nebraska, Jose Sandoval, 38, convicted of shooting and killing five people in 2004, will be the other human guinea pig. Dozier's execution could be carried out as early as January, according to some reports.

Both men are to be given a combination of the sedative diazepam (Valium) and fentanyl in order to stop their breath. In the case of Dozier, the state of Nevada is attempting to include a dose of cisatracurium, a muscle relaxant used in surgical procedures to induce paralysis. They would be the first humans to die at the hand of the new drug protocol.

Opponents of the death penalty and legal rights advocates have sought to intervene on behalf of the prisoners, noting that the potential for a miscalculation of the dosing could lead to the inmate suffering excruciating pain as painkillers failed to take effect.

"There's no medical or scientific basis for any of it," said Joel Zivot, a professor of anesthesiology and surgery from Emory University to the *Washington Post*. "It's just a series of attempts: obtain certain drugs, try them out on prisoners, and see if and how they die."

The rush toward the use of opioid drugs in executions comes as states have encountered increased opposition to the death penalty. According to a 2016 Pew Research survey, support for the death penalty within the population is at its lowest point in over 40 years. Popular revulsion to the barbaric procedure has forced drug manufacturers to refuse to sell the necessary chemicals to state governments.

This has occurred as states hold record-low numbers of inmates slated for execution. Nevada has not executed a prisoner since 2006, and Nebraska has not done so since 1997.

"We're in a new era ... States have now gone through all the drugs closest to the original ones for lethal injection," Fordham University law professor Deborah Denno told the *Post*, stating that "the more [states] experiment, the more they're forced to use new drugs that we know less about in terms of how they might work in an execution."

Opposition to the death penalty has been driven in no small part by a series of botched state executions using similar "experimental" concoctions that have resulted in prisoners gasping for air and writhing in agony as the drugs take effect. This has forced states to turn to unregulated compounding facilities to obtain their drugs as well as shielding the sources for their lethal chemicals from public eyes.

A significant factor in the state turn to opioids is the latter's widespread availability, which the US government, in collusion with pharmaceutical giants,

has ensured. “We simply ordered it through our pharmaceutical distributor, just like every other medication we purchase, and it was delivered ... Nothing out of the ordinary at all,” stated Brooke Keast of the Nevada Department of Corrections of the drugs’ purchase.

In addition to seeking out fentanyl, states have also turned to older, more barbaric forms of execution, including the re-introduction of the firing squad and the electric chair. The states of Florida, Ohio and Oklahoma are seeking to legalize the use of nitrogen gas, to be dispensed in gas chambers, in disposing of their states’ undesirables. This is being done despite, or perhaps *because* of, the latter’s connection to fascistic use in the past.



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