

Inmates file lawsuit against Arkansas jail for administering ivermectin for COVID-19 without informed consent

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The Arkansas chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has filed a lawsuit on behalf of four Washington County inmates against the Washington County Detention Center, Sheriff Tim Helder, and jail physician Dr. Robert Karas which “... charges the defendants for administering ivermectin to incarcerated individuals without prior informed consent as to the nature, contents, or potential side effects of the drug.” The drug, according to the lawsuit, was administered under false pretenses to treat COVID-19 infections; the inmates were under the impression they were receiving “vitamins,” “antibiotics,” and “steroids.”

Notwithstanding warnings issued by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that the drug should not be used to treat COVID-19, right-wing doctors and political figures have endorsed its use. The American Medical Association, American Pharmacists Association, and the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists released a joint statement last year strongly opposing “the ordering, prescribing, or dispensing of ivermectin to prevent or treat COVID-19 outside of a clinical trial.”

Gary Sullivan, legal director of ACLU Arkansas said, “No one—including incarcerated individuals— should be deceived and subject to medical experimentation.” He continues, “Sheriff Helder has a responsibility to provide food, shelter and safe, appropriate care to incarcerated individuals.”

Ignoring warnings from medical authorities, and ivermectin’s lack of efficacy in clinical trials in combating the virus, the Washington County jail has practiced this “medical experimentation” since last July, according to an e-mail informing Helder of the medication’s use. Helder, deferring to medical authorities on treatment, told the *Arkansas Democrat Gazette* in

August 2021, “Whatever a doctor prescribes, that’s out of my bailiwick.” Helder continued, “But I will stake their record against any medical provider in any correctional facility in the United States. Doctors prescribe. They’ve been to medical school. I haven’t.”

The plaintiffs, Dayman Blackburn, Edrick Floreal-Wooten, Jeremiah Little, and Julio Gonzales, say they were given ivermectin in “high doses,” causing them to develop side effects such as blurred vision, diarrhea, and bloody stool.

On the FDA’s website, it is stated that the “FDA has not approved Ivermectin for use in treating or preventing COVID-19 in humans. Ivermectin tablets are approved at very specific doses for some parasitic worms, and there are topical (on the skin) formulations for head lice and skin conditions like rosacea. Ivermectin is not an antiviral (a drug for treating viruses),” adding that “taking large doses of this drug is dangerous and can cause serious harm,” having the potential to cause “nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, seizures, delirium, and death.”

Dr. Karas began administering ivermectin at the jail in November 2020. Furthermore, in a letter sent by his attorney last September, Karas told a state medical board examiner that 254 inmates at the jail had been treated with the drug.

On the Karas Health Care’s Facebook page, Karas states, “I’ve said it throughout [COVID-19] that thank God I practice in Arkansas and not in some other state. Outside of some legal expenses ... I’ve been able to practice medicine exactly *as I see fit* to the benefit of thousands of our patients.” (Emphasis in the original.)

Last August, Justice of the Peace for District 9 Eva Madison, said she had been informed by a county employee that Karas Correctional Health had been prescribing ivermectin to detainees and inmates. Madison

then referred to issuances by the FDA warning against using the anti-parasitic drug to treat COVID-19, further stating that the county should carefully review and address the transgressions before approving a budget.

“I think we need to reevaluate who we are using to provide medical care if they are disregarding FDA guidelines and giving de-wormer to detainees at our county jail,” Madison said at a quorum court meeting in August. “It’s very disturbing to me that, that’s the level of care we’re providing.”

The Sheriff’s Office proposed a 2022 budget that included funding for Karas, wherein Karas asked for a 10 percent increase in its medical services contract. Helder claimed the company has been “an amazing partner” for the Sheriff’s Office throughout the coronavirus pandemic.

Just days after the lawsuit was filed earlier this month, a post on Karas Health Care’s Facebook page, signed by “Dr. Rob and Team” said, “Inmates aren’t dumb and I suspect in the future other inmates around the country will be [suing] their facilities requesting same treatment we’re using at WCDC [Washington County Detention Center] – including the Ivermectin.” Karas continued, “Greater than 95 [percent] of our sick patients haven’t had [COVID-19] before or the vaccine. If you’re in that category and with any obesity or other risk factors I believe the vaccine is safer than getting [COVID-19]. And if you get sick, get started on medicine [ivermectin] right away.”

Karas has boasted of using ivermectin to treat COVID-19, that he regularly gives it to patients with the coronavirus and that he himself has taken it and also given it to family members, prompting the Arkansas State Medical Board to open an investigation into Karas in August.

The medical board has been investigating myriad complaints against Karas over the jail’s use of ivermectin. The investigation is expected to discuss its findings next month in its February meeting.



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