

“I believe she is being sacrificed”: Growing outrage over charges against nurse Michelle Heughins in the tragic death of John Neville

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There is growing support from health care workers for former county detention center nurse Michelle Heughins, who has been unjustly charged with involuntary manslaughter in connection with the death of an inmate in December 2019 at Forsyth County Jail in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Her plea entry is scheduled for June 9, where she is planning to plead “not guilty.”

In a secret grand jury meeting on April 4, charges were dropped against the five detention center officers who had handcuffed, kneeled on and forcefully placed Mr. Neville in a prone position while he was in clear medical distress. Ms. Heughins is now the sole individual indicted for the death.

On the heels of the RaDonda Vaught conviction, nurses are speaking out in opposition to the scapegoating of health care workers for systemic issues, including short-staffing and overwork, that put workers in impossible and unsafe positions.

Sheila, a nurse with 40 years of experience across multiple nursing disciplines, spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* to defend Michelle Heughins and share her experience working in corrections facilities.

Sheila began, “I worked in a prison hospital and a maximum security corrections center about 20 years ago. I’m seeing the same issues now with the Heughins case that I experienced 20 years ago.”

Sheila used her experience to illustrate some of the issues nurses face in correctional facilities. She said, “The way it works is the COs [corrections officers] are there to respond to behavior. The medical workers are there to respond to medical. But the two don’t talk to each other, don’t work together. [Mr. Neville] got behavioral response treatment for a medical issue.”

“[In the bodycam footage] I didn’t see any correct policies being worked out. I know the officers acted out of their scope of practice. When the nurse arrived, the CO officers are supposed to stand down, but as you see in the video, the COs maintained control. [Heughins] should have assumed it or asked for it, but instead it was the COs making medical decisions.”

Sheila explained that she believes nurse Heughins should have assumed control, and it was likely within her scope of practice to do so. However, Sheila explained, the reality of working as a nurse in the prison system is much more complicated.

“You’re told that the officers are in control of everything. You have to be really tough and experienced to fight to take over. You

can’t get intimidated. If I’m the person who has the medical knowledge, then I’m the one who takes the lead in the medical situation. I used to get a lot of heat for that.

“In the videos you can hear the officers asking [Heughins] to leave the room. How was he supposed to get medical attention? Everything the officers were doing was a behavioral response. She was not allowed to follow the standards of care. That’s the main thing that bothers me.”

Sheila also speculated that Ms. Heughins could have been one of the only medical personnel on the floor, and she may have not had the proper experience to handle such a medical emergency. “You can’t be intimidated and you can’t be afraid and you really, really have to have working knowledge. If you work corrections, you don’t see situations like this often, maybe once every six months. You need to have a strong and recent experience in the hospital.”

Sheila continued, “There’s a lot we need to know. Had she been in a hospital situation before? Did the employer require a few years of experience in hospital or provide her with proper training given her inexperience? What was the training like? If she didn’t have the right experience and training, then this goes back to her employer. A systems issue once again.

“The officers are also supposed to know basic first aid, basic CPR. They should have noticed his respirations. Everybody knows this. We all saw what happened to George Floyd. If you have your knee on someone’s belly, on their neck, what do you think is going to happen?”

“I’m a nurse first. You were a murderer, child abuser, I leave that outside. When I go through that door, I am a nurse and they are a patient. I treat them like Mr. President. But that isn’t the dominant culture. Instead, it’s, ‘You’re inmates, you get what you get.’ It may be two weeks before a patient gets their medication, before a patient gets their inhaler. The actual distribution of health care is horrible.”

Sheila broadened the discussion and spoke about the dangerous precedent of prosecuting nurses for mistakes made under immense pressure and overwork. “The fact that 20 years have passed and corrections centers and hospitals have the same issues or even worse conditions, lack of equipment, lack of staff. It boils down to money. They think we are disposable ... Then the CEOs get bonuses while our money goes down. What if you hired 25 new nurses instead of getting your bonus? They won’t do that. Why do

CEOs who know absolutely nothing about hospitals and medicine get to make these decisions?

“Who wants to go to work knowing you might not get to go home or you might go to jail for something that happens at everybody’s job? Everybody makes mistakes. Sure there ought to be recourse for certain severe mistakes, but criminal charges are not appropriate. A change has to come.”

Erika, a nurse in California, told the WSWS, “I think this nurse is a scapegoat for the crimes committed by the officers. The family wants justice for a wrongful death, and they should get it. The nurse did not restrain the inmate, nor did she hogtie the inmate. Why then is she facing manslaughter charges? To me this looks like excessive force committed by the officers. While the nurse did not strongly object to the officer’s actions, she did not participate in the excessive force herself. Why is this even a case against her?”

Erika offered her own personal experience as a nurse in the emergency department, “I’ve witnessed police officers being too aggressive with patients in emergency departments. It’s very difficult to tell an armed officer to back off when they are subduing a patient (or inmate). I’ve never worked in a jail but I imagine the nurses do not interfere when officers are doing their supposed job.”

She continued, “A repeat of George Floyd’s death happens regularly, and something needs to change. Holding a jail nurse responsible for an excessive force death caused by law enforcement will not solve the problem.”

Chana, an experienced nurse in California, is passionate about the fight to defend scapegoated nurses and the fight against the underlying systemic issues in health care through the united action of health care workers. She is also the founder of the growing Facebook group, “Justice for Nurse Michelle Heughins and Mr. John Neville.” She recently spoke to WSWS reporters to share her thoughts on the Michelle Heughins case.

“The full [Medical Examiner] report makes it clear. ‘Cause of death: complications of hypoxic ischemic brain injury due to cardiopulmonary arrest due to positional and compressional asphyxia during prone restraint.’”

Chana continued, “I feel this was a grievous chain of errors on the part of the COs. I don’t know if that is resulting from their training or the policies that were in place, but any competent person would have recognized that this man was in trouble and would have intervened appropriately. I believe had the COs acted differently he would have had a different outcome. This is the fault of the COs and the facility, those who run it and those who own it.”

Chana then turned to a discussion of the role of nurse Michelle Heughins in the emergency. “I want to know, what were the policies and how much authority did she have in this situation? I’ve spoken with nurses who work in corrections. Many agree, she’s at the mercy of the CO determination as to when she can have access to a patient.”

She added, “It also seems she may not have a lot of hospital experience ... and if you don’t have the skills and experience in ACLS, it’s not going to be clear how to jump in and what to do. There’s a lot of emotion and anxiety in situations like this. I have

to presume that she was also witnessing at least the segment before she enters [in the bodycam footage] and initiates resuscitation efforts. I’m sure this wasn’t easy for her.”

Chana spoke about the way the county DA and the sheriff attempted to cover up the death of John Neville. Only after the efforts of the family and local news media were bodycam videos disclosed. “I believe that nurse Heughins is being sacrificed. They had to point a finger of blame somewhere and they chose to point it at her.”

Chana also spoke about what drives her to defend nurses such as Michelle Heughins and others such as RaDonda Vaught, DonQuenick Beasley, Christann Gainey and others.

“Mistakes will be made. We are human, and we are fallible. To be criminally charged for an honest mistake, not a premeditated choice to do harm but an error committed in the noble act of serving humanity, will drive and has been driving health care workers out of their professions and preventing new people from wanting to enter.”

Chana then spoke on the daily stress experienced by nurses who are overburdened with patients and tasks during a shift. “If you have eight patients on medsurge, you end up with 7.5 minutes per hour per patient, that includes looking at labs, grabbing medications and supplies as well as time directly with patients. Seven minutes is not enough! Now we are going to spend some of those precious seven minutes trying to cover ourselves legally rather than giving the loving care that patients deserve.

“We have seen more and more strikes and there’s more coming. We are all exhausted after three years of pushing ourselves into the ground. Now that we can come up for air we are gathering together for safety issues and trying to address change. There is no health care without health care workers. So there’s no profit for the boards and the CEOs without us either.”

On Sunday, May 22, at a meeting hosted by the *World Socialist Web Site Healthcare Workers Newsletter*, nurses from throughout the US met to discuss the situation facing health care workers and the scapegoating of nurses for the consequences of short staffing and overwork.

Nurses at the meeting adopted a resolution, founding a national health care workers steering committee to assist in the building of rank-and-file committees at every hospital and workplace to defend nurses and health care workers, and to connect opposition to victimization to a struggle to advance the interests of nurses and patients against the for-profit health care system.

Send in your statement opposing the victimization of Michelle Heughins and other nurses using the form below.



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