



ALLEGED STEM CELL SCAM ARTISTS FACE EXTRADITION – FINALLY

Two alleged stem cell fraudsters doing business on the Internet from their Llandudno, Cape Town, home have finally run head-long into a brick wall after the Constitutional Court ruled that they can be extradited to face charges in the USA.

They are on the FBI's 'most wanted' list because of their alleged duping of several terminally ill Americans and are among two dozen long-outstanding extradition cases which include alleged drug smuggler Nello Quagliani and a 26-year-old father Jonathan Ells, accused of distributing hundreds of child rape movies.

The Constitutional Court on 21 January overturned a Pretoria High Court 2008 decision that the SA-US extradition treaty was not properly enacted into law. This closed the net on a swathe of fugitives from justice who for years have lived in South Africa with apparent impunity, despite the best attempts of Interpol and local police.

Stephen van Rooyen (47) and Laura Brown (38) face a 51-count March 2006 Atlanta federal grand jury indictment involving the distribution of untested stem cell treatment drugs 'without any basis in science'.

The couple were allegedly paid 'thousands of dollars by individuals' suffering with motor neuron disease, multiple sclerosis and other serious and incurable diseases. US State Attorney David Nahmias said in August 2006 that Van Rooyen and Brown 'provided false and misleading information' about the effectiveness of stem cell treatment.

Three-year probe

The grand jury decision to prosecute the couple followed an intensive three-year probe by the FBI and the American Special Agents of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Charges include

fraud and distributing unapproved and misbranded drugs.

The couple had allegedly marketed their products online internationally to desperate patients in several countries, including Switzerland, Holland, Germany, Spain, India, Trinidad, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and even China and the Ukraine.

Nahmias said the couple's alleged scam posed a grave threat to patients' health. 'This type of fraud is especially harmful because it victimises people in the most vulnerable situation,' he said. 'The allegations in this indictment are serious and will be prosecuted vigorously,' he added.

Allegations against Van Rooyen and Brown date back to September 2002, when hopeful patients started flocking to clinics and paid thousands of dollars for relief via the supposed miracle cure. Speaking hours after the latest court ruling, their lawyer, Davout Wolhuter, said the couple were 'totally freaked out' but would hand themselves over for voluntary arrest and appearance in a magistrates court while considering legal counter-measures.

They allegedly fled the USA in 2003, launching a similar Internet-based operation from a clinic in Hout Bay. They were subsequently arrested, with the help of Interpol, at Oliver Tambo International Airport on returning from the Seychelles on 10 June 2006. However, their high-powered legal team secured bail and they continued life virtually unhindered as the legal status of the extradition agreement hung in limbo.

Van Rooyen and Brown, a model, met in Los Angeles where she was studying yoga in the late 1990s. In 2002 they travelled to Atlanta to join an osteopath, Mitchell Chen, in his business, which

embraced umbilical cord blood and stem cell research.

After several months the couple broke away from Chen, forming a company, Biomark, which soon fell foul of the US authorities, resulting in a raid of their Miami offices by the Federal Districts Attorney and their sudden departure for South Africa.

- Stem cells are the primitive cells that grow into the roughly 200 types of cell that comprise the body's tissues. The dream is to coax these cells into becoming lab-dish replacements for heart, liver, skin, eye, brain, nerve and other cells destroyed by disease, accident, war or normal wear-and-tear. Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's, type 1 diabetes, cancer and cardiac degeneration are among the many disorders that, in theory, could be healed by this wonder cure. Stem cells are currently used to restore blood-forming and immune system function after high-dose chemotherapy for some types of cancer. However, claims made by commercial promoters go way beyond what is possible, embellishing on the as yet unproven ability of scientists to control stem cell conversion into new, functionally mature cells that may one day lead to cures for many currently incurable diseases.

- Companies banking on what may become possible include Cyrobanks International (Almonte Springs, Florida) and the Cord Blood Registry in San Bruno, California, which provide processing and storage of stem cells from umbilical cord blood for potential future use by the child or family members, for a down-payment of around R16 000, plus R1 000 annually for storage.

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