

THE “CONSPIRACY THEORY” THAT PROMPTED KEVIN CURTIS’ EARLIER LETTERS TO POLITICIANS

Yesterday, charges against Paul Kevin Curtis that he sent letters testing positive for ricin to Senator Lowell Wicker and the White House were dropped. It is quite encouraging that the FBI would this time choose not to continue harassing Curtis once they realized they had no evidence against him, unlike their behavior in the Amerithrax case where they pursued Steven Hatfill for years (until paying out a \$2.8 million dollar settlement) and drove Bruce Ivins to his grave on the basis of evidence that couldn’t withstand scrutiny.

Curtis was true to his quirky and colorful character yesterday after being released, and the New York Times reported how he explained at a subsequent press conference that he had no idea what ricin is:

Mr. Curtis, a party entertainer who dresses and sings as Elvis, Prince, Johnny Cash, Bon Jovi and others, had been in jail since Wednesday. He said he had never even heard of ricin. “I thought they said rice,” he said. “I said I don’t even eat rice.”

Curtis was already known to local officials when the tainted letters surfaced and most press coverage of his arrest provided details about why he wrote so many letters before the tainted ones emerged. From a Washington Post article on his arrest:

But a darker world apparently also

existed for Curtis, according to frequent writings on social media Web sites, legal records and a lengthy trail of letters sent previously to lawmakers from Mississippi to Capitol Hill.

The man the FBI says unnerved much of official Washington this week, leaving mail handlers, staffers and aides seeing danger in any crinkled or unmarked envelope, was also a well-practiced conspiracy theorist. He wrote online that Elvis-impersonating contests had become rigged and politicized.

Many of his diatribes revolved around conspiracy theories, on which he blamed many of the malignancies in his life. The broken relationships, the financial duress, the increasing isolation he perceived – all grew out of an episode when he was working in a morgue as a contract cleaner, according to an online post on ripoffreport.com, which was signed, “I am Kevin Curtis and I approve this message.”

According to the long, detailed post, Curtis accidentally discovered bags of body parts in the morgue and reported his finding to authorities, who immediately made him a “person of interest where my every move was watched and video taped.” He described cameras zooming in on him and said he was followed by agents.

So the picture painted when he was arrested and charged was that Curtis was a disturbed person who was so crazy he believed that there is a black market in human body parts and that he was being persecuted for exposing a portion of that market. Interestingly, now that the charges against him have been dropped, the New York Times piece linked above makes no mention of the conspiracy theory while today’s Washington Post story makes only a very brief reference to it in

a list of other portions of his life story:

Curtis is known for detailed Internet diatribes, his long-held conspiracy theory about underground trafficking in human body parts – which he has turned into a novel-in-progress called “Missing Pieces” – and his work as an Elvis impersonator. The Corinth, Miss., man has been arrested four times since 2000 on charges that include cyber-harassment.

Curtis’ account of discovering evidence of illegal body part trafficking stood out to me because I knew that such illegal trafficking in fact exists. A local firm here in Gainesville has been in the middle of an ugly story unfolding around the difficult legal and ethical issues relating to how tremendous advances in medical science have driven a huge demand for human tissue and bone.

Most people are quite aware of the process of organ transplantation and how organ donation either through advance planning or by surviving family members signing off on donation saves many lives. But there also are many medical procedures that rely on human bone or tissue that has been processed.

Back in July of 2012, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists posted a long article that goes into the details of the black market for human tissue and bones and how this market is driven by the huge profits to be made:

An investigation by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) shows that the evidence in the case – and in other body-stealing scandals across the globe – also raises larger questions about the conduct of an industry that recycles more than 30,000 human bodies each year.

Police in places

including Hungary and Ukraine, and North Carolina and Alabama in the U.S., have alleged that tissue suppliers stole tissue, committed fraud and forgery, or took kickbacks to pad their pockets. These cases suggest that Michael Mastromarino wasn't the only body wrangler who has bent or broken the rules in the drive to supply the industry with flesh and bone.

The laws surrounding the recovery, processing and reimplantation of tissue and bone have resulted in a dizzying array of companies working at different steps in the process:

More than 2,500 companies registered with the U.S. government rely to varying degrees on the fees they charge for crafting implants made from human tissue.

The world's largest human-tissue bank, Musculoskeletal Transplant Foundation, took in nearly \$400 million in revenues in 2010.

MTF is set up as a tax-exempt nonprofit, like most organizations that recover the tissue from donors located through hospitals, funeral homes and morgues. Most recovery outfits supply processing companies like RTI, which clean the pieces and mill them into usable implants. The processing companies in turn distribute them directly to hospitals or use an outside vendor such as medical device giant Zimmer to ship them around the world.

Players bid for exclusive access to U.S. donors. For example, medical device company Bacterin announced last year that it "successfully secured rights of first refusal of human tissue with multiple recovery agencies."

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The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio has also recovered tissue for RTI. Its contract includes a fee chart – attaching different prices to the same tissue based on the donor's age. RTI reimburses the recovery bank \$1,755 for a 20-year-old femur; but \$553 for the same bone from an 80-year-old.

In 1984 Congress passed the National Organ Transplant Act, making it illegal to buy and sell human organs and other human tissues. But it allowed charging "reasonable" fees for recovering, cleaning and distributing those parts.

Younger tissue is stronger and can be more lucrative for tissue processors because it can be used for higher-value grafts. Neither RTI nor the University of Texas responded to repeated requests for clarification about why the same tissues would carry such varying fees.

RTI Biologics, referred to above as RTI, is the local Gainesville-area company that prompted my interest in these issues. In September of 2012, RTI severed its ties with the Ukrainian suppliers that were at the center of many of the problems that have been highlighted in illegal trafficking.

At least in all of the major media stories I have read, nowhere in the discussions of Curtis' "conspiracy theory" on body part trafficking was it ever mentioned that such an illegal market does in fact exist and that hundreds of millions of dollars in annual revenue are at least in part behind the drive to obtain body parts both legally and illegally. The scene described by Curtis when he opened the wrong refrigerator while cleaning the floor in a hospital morgue is not too different from the photos at the top of the ICIJ article linked above:

About 4 hour into the job after I laid down the first coat of sealer, I became

very thirsty. I was unable to exit the morgue due to floor finish not drying as fast as I had anticipated with the humidity level, so I opened the door to a small refrigerator located to the right of the autopsy table. I assumed I might find some water or anything to drink as I was dehydrated.

What I discovered, changed my life forever! There were dismembered body parts & organs wrapped in plastic. A leg, an arm, a hand, a foot, hearts, lungs, tissue, eyes and even a severed human head!

I have no idea whether the morgue Curtis was cleaning was harvesting the body parts legally or illegally, but his description of what he saw should not be dismissed as delusional. His subsequent behavior may well have been influenced by mental illness that has been described, but there are elements of truth in the life-changing event Curtis describes despite the failure of the media to understand or explain those bits of truth.

Oh, and if you want a truly crazy conspiracy theory on tissue trafficking, try Iran's claims of a Zionist plot selling kidneys from Syria.