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Kansas doctor, wife face new sentencing in overdose deaths

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WICHITA, Kan. (AP) — The Kansas physician and his wife were convicted of a shocking crime: running a moneymaking conspiracy at a clinic prosecutors have linked to 68 drug overdose deaths.

Yet Dr. Stephen Schneider and his wife, Linda, contend they also helped people with chronic pain at their Haysville clinic, even as the doctor saw up to 100 patients a day, with pads of pre-signed prescription forms left for staff to use when he was out. Their lawyers argued during a 2010 trial that they were overwhelmed and listened to drugmakers who pushed potent narcotics.

U.S. District Judge Monti Belot will weigh such factors on Thursday when he re-sentences the couple in the wake of a ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court in a separate case.

The Schneiders were convicted of conspiracy to commit health care fraud resulting in those deaths, unlawfully prescribing drugs, health care fraud and money laundering. The doctor, now 62, was sentenced to 30 years; his wife, now 57, was sentenced to 33 years.

But the Supreme Court ruled last year that a victim's drug use must be the actual cause of death — not just a contributing factor — to impose the harshest punishments under the federal Controlled Substances Act.

In June, Belot threw out some sentences carrying the longest prison terms. As the Schneiders await new sentences, their family embraces a glimmer of hope that the judge may lessen their sentences so they do not die in prison.

For others, the case is a painful reminder that prescription drug abuse claims lives — including those of former patients of the Schneider clinic who died years after the couple was put behind bars.

Malpractice attorney Larry Wall said he has received about a half dozen calls from family members of addicts who have died since the clinic closed. "It's the people addicted that is the real damage he did," Wall said.

"Unfortunately, little has changed since Dr. Schneider made headlines in Haysville," Wall said. "Local doctors still look the other way and do everything to protect bad doctors."

Deaths linked to addictive prescription painkillers such as Vicodin and OxyContin have reached an estimated 16,000 per year nationwide. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has called on doctors to limit their use to the most severe pain such as cancer and end-of-life care.

At Indian Alcoholism Treatment Services, drug counselor Bobby Fulgroat Jr. often talks about his former girlfriend and longtime friend Mary Sue Ladamirak, who died in 2006 of an overdose. Her family sued the Schneiders' clinic, alleging the staff knew she was addicted to painkillers when she became a patient in 2003.

Fulgroat said he hopes telling her story during group sessions at the center where he works will demonstrate how addiction can happen to anybody.

Pat Hatcher, Linda Schneider's sister who prepared copies of medical records for patients after the clinic closed, still occasionally recognizes the name of a former patient when she reads the obituaries or gets a call about a death. But Hatcher blames the deaths on patients' inability to find medical care because doctors are scared of facing of prosecution if they write them prescriptions.

Tears well in her eyes as Hatcher recounts the death two months ago of their mother, Ellen Attebury. The dying woman asked her to give Linda Schneider a message: "Tell her she couldn't wait any longer for Linda. Linda would have to understand God is ready for her."

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