

Trial begins in alleged Medicare scheme

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Four men, including a physician who once taught at LSU and the former pastor of a Baton Rouge ministry, went on trial Monday in Baton Rouge for the alleged theft of \$2.5 million from Medicare.

Justice Department prosecutor Ben Curtis told a jury of five women and seven men that the defendants “blatantly and successfully” took the money that should have gone “to the blind and the disabled and the elderly.”

According to the indictment, the conspiracy to commit health-care fraud against the United States and to pay health-care kickbacks occurred from December 2003 through March 2009.

Those allegations were disputed by attorneys for Nnanta Felix Ngari, 54, of Prairieville; Henry Lamont Jones, 36, of Zachary; Dr. Sofjan M. Lamid, 83, of Mandeville; and Ernest Payne, 51, of Houston.

“Mr. Jones was pastor at Lifeline Ministry,” defense attorney C. Frank Holthaus told jurors.

“His assistant or associate pastor was Ernest Payne,” Holthaus added.

The Louisiana secretary of state lists The Lifeline Ministry Inc. as an inactive nonprofit in the 6500 block of North Foster Drive. Jones was listed as an agent and director.

“If there’s millions of dollars around here ... I don’t see it,” Holthaus said. “I don’t know what that’s about – millions.”

Curtis, the prosecutor, told jurors Ngari operated Unique Medical Solution Inc. in Prairieville.

Unique Medical Solutions received millions of dollars from Medicare for power wheelchairs and other medical equipment that Lamid prescribed for patients whom Jones and Payne attracted to health fairs at area churches, Curtis added.

“They were all working together in a greedy fashion to rip off Medicare,” Curtis alleged.

Fraud occurred, Curtis said, when Lamid prescribed power wheelchairs for hundreds of people who did not need them.

Each prescription, Curtis said, was worth “thousands of dollars.

“Dr. Lamid was getting paid not to be a doctor, but to write these prescriptions,” Curtis told jurors.

One of the key witnesses against the group, Curtis said, will be a former patient recruiter, Bonnie Simmons, 60, of Kentwood.

“Simmons is no angel,” Curtis said, adding that she has pleaded guilty in a related case.

Holthaus noted that Simmons has not been sentenced in her case.

He said Simmons “is after the richest reward of all — freedom.” He urged jurors not to believe she is “a bad woman gone good.”

Defense attorney Andre Belanger said: “Felix Ngari is not guilty.”

Belanger said the native of Nigeria immigrated to this country and became a naturalized citizen.

“Mr. Ngari’s business was above-board,” Belanger added. “Felix Ngari never forged a prescription. Felix Ngari never paid Dr. Lamid or any other doctors to write medically unnecessary prescriptions.”

Belanger said Simmons is “a thief and a liar and she has been for many years.”

Defense attorney Martin E. Regan Jr. said Lamid is a recognized expert in the field of rehabilitative medicine.

“He’s taught medical school (classes) at LSU and in Wisconsin,” Regan said of the native of Indonesia. “He’s never been convicted of anything in his life.”

Lamid examined 463 patients at the health fairs and “rejected 77 of them,” Regan said.

Regardless of whether he prescribed a power wheelchair for a Medicare beneficiary, Regan said, “Dr. Lamid ... got paid \$85 per patient.”

Lamid also received between \$100 and \$500 in expense payments for each health fair he attended, Regan explained.

“He absolutely received no kickbacks or bribes,” Regan said of Lamid.

Defense attorney Edward J. Gonzales told jurors Payne is not a criminal.

“Like Dr. Lamid, he, too, is going to testify,” Gonzales said of Payne. “You will come to the conclusion that the government has made a mistake.”

The trial in the courtroom of U.S. District Judge James J. Brady is expected to last approximately two weeks.

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