



UNITED STATES ATTORNEY'S OFFICE
Southern District of New York

ACTING U.S. ATTORNEY JOON H. KIM

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CONTACT: U.S. ATTORNEY'S OFFICE
James Margolin, Dawn Dearden
Nicholas Biase,
(212) 637-2600

DEA
Erin Mulvey
(212) 337-2906

NYPD
Stephen Davis, J. Peter Donald
(646) 610-8900

DOI
Diane Struzzi
(212) 825-5931

DOCTOR AND NURSE PRACTITIONER AMONG THREE
DEFENDANTS CHARGED IN MANHATTAN FEDERAL COURT FOR
OXYCODONE AND FENTANYL DIVERSION SCHEME

Joon H. Kim, the Acting United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, James J. Hunt, the Special Agent in Charge of the New York Field Division of the Drug Enforcement Administration ("DEA"), James P. O'Neill, the Commissioner of the Police Department for the City of New York ("NYPD"), and Mark G. Peters, the Commissioner of the New York City Department of Investigation ("DOI"), today announced the arrests of ERNESTO LOPEZ, a New York-licensed doctor who wrote thousands of medically unnecessary prescriptions for oxycodone and fentanyl patches over an approximately three-year period, SHARON WASHINGTON-BHAMRE, a pediatric nurse practitioner who also wrote medically unnecessary prescriptions for oxycodone, and AUDRA BAKER, an employee at one of LOPEZ's medical offices who helped facilitate the diversion scheme. All three defendants are charged with conspiracy to distribute controlled substances and were arrested earlier this morning. The defendants will be presented in Manhattan federal court before U.S. Magistrate Judge Barbara C. Moses later today.

Acting U.S. Attorney Joon H. Kim stated: "As alleged, these defendants acted like drug dealers in lab coats, directly contributing to the glut of highly-addictive opioids flooding the streets of New York City and its surrounding communities. Our office will continue to investigate and prosecute all those who abuse their medical licenses to enrich themselves."

DEA Special Agent in Charge James J. Hunt stated: "At the same time that cartels are pushing fentanyl on opioid users, this investigation identified a rogue doctor following suit. With offices strategically located in Nassau County, Manhattan, and Queens, Dr. Lopez

allegedly wrote unnecessary prescriptions for oxycodone and fentanyl worth millions of dollars on the street. I commend our law enforcement partners for their collaboration and hard work on this investigation.”

DOI Commissioner Mark G. Peters said: “This doctor and his co-defendants in the medical profession disregarded their duty to aid the sick and infirmed, deciding instead to heed personal profit in return for pushing dangerous opioids, according to the charges. DOI is proud to work with our federal and local law enforcement partners on this significant investigation to expose and stop a pill mill advancing the perilous opioid crisis.”

The following allegations are based on the Complaints¹ and other documents filed in Manhattan federal court:

Oxycodone and fentanyl are highly addictive, narcotic opioids that are used to treat severe and chronic pain conditions. Oxycodone prescriptions are in high demand and have significant cash value to drug dealers, who sell them on the street for large amounts of money. For example, 30-milligram oxycodone tablets have a current street value of approximately \$20 to \$30 per tablet in New York City, with street prices even higher in other parts of the country. Thus, a single prescription for 120 30-milligram tablets of oxycodone can net an illicit distributor \$2,400 in cash or more. Fentanyl patches are also commonly abused and sold for cash on the street by drug dealers. Because it is much more potent than heroin, fentanyl frequently results in overdoses that can lead to respiratory depression and death.

From 2015 until October 2017, LOPEZ operated medical clinics located in Manhattan, New York; Jackson Heights, New York; and Franklin Square, New York, where LOPEZ wrote thousands of prescriptions for large quantities of oxycodone and fentanyl patches in exchange for cash payments. BAKER assisted LOPEZ in operating two of his medical offices. LOPEZ typically charged \$200 to \$300 in cash for “patient visits,” where LOPEZ performed no meaningful physical examination of patients. Instead, a typical “patient visit” consisted primarily of recording a patient’s vital signs and sometimes involved the brief movement of a patient’s limbs. LOPEZ then prescribed large quantities of oxycodone, most frequently 120 30-milligram tablets, and fentanyl patches. Between January 2015 and the present, LOPEZ wrote more than 8,000 oxycodone prescriptions, resulting in an estimated \$2 million in fees to LOPEZ. BAKER assisted LOPEZ in the diversion of oxycodone and fentanyl. For example, BAKER steered at least one patient to a particular individual (“CC-1”), so that CC-1 could purchase that individual’s oxycodone prescriptions and resell the drugs on the street.

From December 2015 until October 2017, WASHINGTON-BHAMRE, a pediatric nurse practitioner, wrote scores of medically unnecessary oxycodone prescriptions. During this time, WASHINGTON-BHAMRE wrote oxycodone prescriptions in the names of individuals provided to her by CC-1 without performing any examination of the purported patients.

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LOPEZ, 74, of Flushing, New York, BAKER, 49, of Manhattan, New York, and WASHINGTON-BHAMRE, 52, of Rochelle Park, New Jersey, are each charged with one count

¹ As the introductory phrase signifies, the entirety of the text of the Complaints, and the description of the Complaints set forth herein, constitute only allegations, and every fact described should be treated as an allegation.

of conspiring to distribute and possess with intent to distribute a controlled substance, which carries a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison. The maximum potential sentence is prescribed by Congress and is provided here for informational purposes only, as any sentencing of the defendants will be determined by the judge.

Mr. Kim praised the outstanding investigative work of the DEA's New York Tactical Diversion Squad, which comprises agents and officers from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, the New York City Police Department, the New York State Police, New York State Division of Financial Services and New York City Department of Investigation. Mr. Kim also thanked the Department of Health and Human Services, the New York State Office of the Medicaid Inspector General, the New York City Human Resources Administration, the Nassau County Police Department and Asset Forfeiture Unit, the Nassau County District Attorney's Office, the New York County District Attorney's Office, and the New York State Department of Financial Services for their work on the investigation.

Parts of this case were conducted under the auspices of the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF), a partnership between federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies. The principal mission of the OCDETF program is to identify, disrupt, and dismantle the most serious drug trafficking, weapons trafficking, and money laundering organizations and those primarily responsible for the nation's illegal drug supply.

This matter is being handled by the Office's Narcotics Unit. Assistant United States Attorneys Elizabeth Hanft and Michael McGinnis are in charge of the prosecution.

The charges contained in the Complaints are merely accusations, and the defendants are presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty.

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