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Therapist charged in indecent assault

By Katie Curley Katzman

NEWBURYPORT — A local physical therapist will soon face a judge after police allege he touched a female patient inappropriately during several appointments spanning three months.

Richard J. Bernier, 61, of 55 Elm St., Byfield, was arrested Friday on eight counts of indecent assault and battery on a person over 14 years of age. Bernier was arraigned yesterday in Newburyport District Court and was released on personal recognizance. He is due back in court for a pretrial hearing on March 16.

According to Newburyport police reports, Bernier, who has owned and operated Bernier Physical Therapy Associates on Forrester Street for 26 years, began treating a 54-year-old woman for hip and lower back pain in July.

According to police, the woman had found Bernier in the Yellow Pages.

Though during her first appointment the woman saw another doctor in the practice, her second appointment was with Bernier who, according to court records, told her, "I know the treatment you need, and I'm the only one who knows how to do it, so I will handle your appointments for you."

According to police reports, "Bernier had her lay down on a bed in an exam room face down. The victim stated that he did not wear gloves," the report read, stating Bernier never washed his hands nor wore gloves during any visit. "He then pulled her pants and underwear down to her knees. Bernier did not put a robe or sheet or any covering on her body."

According to the report, he then directed the victim to roll over so her front was fully exposed. He then massaged the muscles in her hip and groin area, stating it was a type of therapy.

Once the victim had spoken to her orthopedic surgeon, who had directed her to get physical therapy, he didn't understand why she was not experiencing any relief.

"She felt extremely uncomfortable but thought it was part of the physical therapy," the report stated. "She stated she probably had another five to six appointments with Bernier and it was the same thing every time."

After a month, the woman's orthopedic surgeon became concerned the physical therapist she had been seeing was making the injury worse by tearing tissue that was contributing to her ongoing pain and advised her to stop treatment.

On her last visit, Bernier asked the patient, "When you go out, does your boyfriend get jealous?" According to

court records, Bernier then slapped the woman across the buttocks as he walked out of the room.

"While finishing her stretches, she could hear him pacing in the hallways outside the door saying, 'I hate myself, I hate myself,'" the report read. "When she was leaving, he was out screaming at the receptionist about something."

It wasn't until September, when the woman had started going to physical therapy with a new doctor out of Anna Jaques Hospital, that she realized she had been assaulted.

"When going to a new physical therapist, she realized the difference and she thanked the doctor for not taking her clothes off," the police report read. "The doctor asked if something had happened, and the victim let her know what he had done."

The new doctor, as a mandated reporter, contacted the American Physical Therapy Association.

The woman went to the Newburyport Police Department, where an investigation began.

"This was a six-month investigation," Lt. Mark Murray said yesterday. "On the advice of the district attorney, we filed charges."

Murray said police do not believe there are more victims.

Bernier could not be reached for comment last night. According to his Web site, Bernier has been a physical therapist for 29 years and claims to have treated over 25,000 patients. Bernier received his Bachelor of Science degree from Northeastern University in 1979 and his doctorate degree from Simmons College in 2005.

His biography on his Web site says he is member of the American Physical Therapy Association, as well as the New England Physical Therapy Network, and is an active member of the Newburyport Rotary Club.