

# Former Merced dentist pleads no contest to sexual battery of patients

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A former Merced dentist pleaded no contest Wednesday to sexually assaulting four sedated female patients.

The plea happened minutes before a Merced County Superior Court jury was scheduled to be selected for the trial of Sang Hyuk Park.

Park, 45, may have avoided a longer prison sentence by pleading before Judge Mark V. Bacciarini to four felony counts of sexual battery on patients under anesthesia.

As part of the deal cut with the Merced County District Attorney's Office, Park will serve three years in state prison, must register as a sex offender for life and is banned from practicing medicine or dentistry, Chief Deputy District Attorney Rob Carroll said.

“I’m very grateful to each of the victims,” Carroll said Wednesday. “They were very courageous. They were willing to testify, though they obviously didn’t want to if they didn’t have to.”

Carroll said his primary concerns in the case were to protect the victims, force Park to register as a sex offender and serve state prison time, while ensuring Park could never practice dentistry again.

Carroll described the evidence against Park as very strong. “I’m extremely pleased we were able to resolve this without further traumatizing the victims,” Carroll said.

Carroll also praised the “great work” of Merced Police Detective Raquel Rios, the lead investigator in the case. Rios said she was satisfied with the outcome. “I’m very pleased, especially because the victims are comfortable with the outcome,” Rios said.

Park could not be reached for comment Wednesday. His attorney, Thomas Johnson, said he did not wish to comment until after Park is formally sentenced July 2. Park remains free on bail. The judge ordered Park to surrender his passport.

Park was charged with groping and fondling four unconscious women between June 2011 and November 2012 at his Merced office, which has since closed. Merced police believe the abuse may have dated back to at least 2004, but those cases could not be charged because the statute of limitations had run out. Police identified at least half a dozen women who may have been victimized by Park.

Investigators said Park sedated the women, who ranged in age from late teens to late 20s. He then would “find an excuse” to dismiss his assistants from the room and sexually abuse the patients, Rios said.

The pattern of sexually abuse came to light in late 2012 when one of the women filed a complaint with police. During a recorded telephone conversation with Park on Oct. 22, 2012, the former dentist admitted photographing the woman’s exposed body, but told her she had consented. He said he deleted the photographs, the police report says.

He also admitted exposing himself to the woman and making her touch his body, but denied drugging her. Park told the woman he wanted a “relationship” with her, despite his marriage, but said she had rejected him, the report says.

“That’s, I made a mistake, I shouldn’t have done it, I’m sorry,” Park says in the transcript of the phone call. Late in the call he said, “I know certain things I did, I didn’t do properly and I asked you and you said no, that’s it, I mean I take you as an adult and then I acted foolish.”

Park was arrested Oct. 30, 2012.

Several more women came forward after Park’s arrest was reported in the media, each recounting similar experiences with Park. Many of the victims were initially unsure what had happened. Several said they believed they had been “dreaming” or “hallucinating” at the time they were attacked, according to police reports.

Both Rios and Carroll said the “courage” of the victims could not be overstated.

“If it had not been for them, especially (the first reporting victim), this behavior undoubtedly would have continued,” Rios said. “I’m glad they can avoid testifying and that they get to speak out at his sentencing.”

Park will be eligible for parole after serving 18 months in state prison.

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