

George Doodnaught, Toronto Anesthesiologist, Guilty Of Sexually Assaulting Women During Surgery

CP | By Allison Jones, The Canadian Press

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TORONTO - An anesthesiologist was convicted Tuesday of sexually assaulting 21 vulnerable, sedated women during surgeries, crimes the judge called "shocking and abhorrent."

Dr. George Doodnaught relied on his three decades of operating room experience to avoid detection as he kissed women, fondled their breasts and put his penis in their mouth or hand, concealed from other medical staff only by a surgical drape, the judge found.

Doodnaught was known as a "touchy feely" doctor, often stroking a patient's cheek or hair to soothe them during surgery, so his physical proximity during surgery didn't arouse suspicion with other staff, the judge found.

"He was familiar with the surgical procedures and would know when it was safe to commit the relatively brief assaults without being seen," Ontario Superior Court Judge David McCombs ruled.

"He had control over (his patients') level of anesthesia and would have known that they could not openly resist. He relied on the amnesiac effects of the drugs to shield him from complaints."

By the time the first of the 21 women went to police after her surgery on Feb. 11, 2010, North York General Hospital had, in fact, received three such complaints between 2006 and 2008, but had not acted on them.

The assaults rose "dramatically" in frequency until that woman went to police, the judge said. The first six assaults were spread over 3 1/2 years, while in the last six months before he was stopped there were 15, McCombs noted.

The hospital told Doodnaught to take a leave of absence after the last woman he assaulted went to police. The hospital said Tuesday the doctor would not be returning there and the College of Physicians and Surgeons will now determine his professional fate.

The woman, who can't be identified due to a publication ban, said she was proud of the other women who came forward after Doodnaught was charged and police publicized his arrest, and she "finally" believes in the justice system.

"It never mattered to me what people thought of me or what they thought of any of the other victims," the woman said. "It mattered to

me what I knew had happened. I was awake. I knew it happened."

Several of Doodnaught's victims were in court as the verdict was read, and some people in the packed, standing room only courtroom could be heard sighing with relief or whispering "Yes."

All but one of the assaults happened during surgeries at North York General Hospital, where the CEO said Tuesday that such crimes were previously unheard of and he isn't aware of another case like this anywhere.

"The sacred bond of caring and trust was broken by a doctor who worked here," Tim Rutledge said. "That he did this in an operating room, a place of ultimate trust, is difficult to understand and frankly shocking."

Rutledge apologized on behalf of the hospital to all of the victims for the "profound impact" Doodnaught's crimes have had on their lives. The hospital has since made changes to how it addresses and tracks patient complaints, he said.

The judge noted that the women did not know each other and were unaware of the particulars of other patients' stories when they separately came forward.

"The complainants were sedated at the time of their surgeries and the sedation no doubt affected their ability to accurately perceive and remember events," McCombs wrote in his decision.

"However, I have found that they were conscious and aware during significant parts of their surgeries and were able to recall these shocking and abhorrent events."

The judge rejected the evidence of defence experts who suggested patients under conscious sedation could have hallucinated the sexual assaults. He said Crown evidence that such hallucinations are "virtually unheard of" is entitled to considerable weight.

Dr. George Mashour, an anesthetist who has researched awareness of patients during conscious sedation, said that while sexual hallucinations with the drugs Doodnaught used have been reported, they're very rare and only occurred with much higher dosages that Doodnaught used, McCombs wrote.

Mashour testified that the odds are "vanishingly rare" that the drugs caused the patients to believe they were molested. If the drugs were to blame, he testified, he wouldn't expect them all to relate to a single doctor.

Crown attorney David Wright said in a brief statement after the verdict that "justice has been served, 21 times."

Doodnaught's lawyer Brian Greenspan said his client is "very disappointed" by the verdict and may decide to appeal.

"It will take some time for him to review the judgment as well, provide us with instruction and consider what his position is and the position of his family," he said outside court.

Doodnaught's wife, who was also in court for the verdict, refused to stand for the judge when he walked back into the courtroom after a short break to discuss dates for sentencing arguments with lawyers.

Doodnaught, who remains free on bail until sentencing, did not comment when he left the courthouse.

A date for sentencing arguments is to be set Dec. 13.

Filed by Jacqueline Delange