



Jailed doctor keeps license

Botched care, extortion, teen drug sale -- and he can still practice medicine

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For more than 20 years, the state [Health Department](#) has been receiving complaints about [Howard J. Levine](#), a Seattle physician who began his medical career as a gynecologist in the 1970s and may end it in a federal prison cell.

Levine's medical license also has been suspended four times -- including once after patients accused him of botching several abortions and, later, when he served nearly two years in a federal penitentiary for extortion and wire fraud. But every time, until now, Washington's [Medical Quality Assurance Commission](#) reinstated his credentials and allowed him to continue practicing.

Last month, federal agents arrested Levine, 58, on charges that he illegally sold anabolic steroids from his latest business, Northwest Lifestyle Medicine, on Capitol Hill, and they have been holding him since then. If convicted, Levine, who has pleaded not guilty, faces up to five years in prison.

His lawyer, [Jan Olson](#), did not return repeated calls seeking comment.

The story of how Levine degenerated from promising young doctor to law enforcement quarry remains a mystery -- his former wife mentions only a pattern of relentlessly "self-destructive" habits. But the physician's ability to retain his credentials, even in the face of numerous malpractice suits, is simply a matter of statute.

"Laws direct that we stop the inappropriate professional misconduct and still allow that person to continue -- providing they do so safely," said [Donn Moyer](#), a spokesman with the Department of Health. "In most cases, when some sort of discipline happens, the health care provider turns around and does the right thing."

The state uses a graduated system of sanctions for medical professionals, with punishments ranging from reprimands to requests for corrective action, three of which Levine received. But each slap on the wrist seemed merely to redirect the physician toward new, increasingly illicit ventures. Not until last month did the state actually bar Levine from practice -- one step short of officially revoking his license.

"The hope is that health care providers get headed on the straight and narrow," Moyer said. "But in this case, the offenses just escalated."

Initially, Levine was a bright, attentive gynecologist in private practice at Women's [Health Care Center](#) in Seattle, where he "delivered tons of babies," said his ex-wife, [Natalie Weinstein](#).

"He was extremely warm and caring," she said. "He would come home crying if a baby wasn't well."

But within 10 years of graduating from [New York Medical College](#) in 1973, Levine had been sued for malpractice, and by 1999, at least seven women had made allegations troubling enough that state regulators prohibited the doctor from practicing gynecology. Several had left his office with perforated uteruses requiring emergency surgery; others, according to state medical documents, he had verbally attacked.

"Pathetic," he snarled, according to one woman who left his office bleeding and in tears.

"A pattern of behavior had emerged with regard to his ob/gyn care," said [Blake Maresh](#), executive director of the commission. "The vast majority of physicians who have an encounter with the medical commission will learn their lesson. They will do what they need to do in order to get their practice right, and we won't see them again."

But Levine, now prevented from practicing women's health care, simply moved on to other specialties.

He began using an online handle, "DrViagra," and soon opened a small Web-based firm called ConfiMed to begin prescribing drugs over the Internet -- Viagra, in particular -- until the Kansas attorney general sued him for selling the sexual enhancement pill to a 16-year-old boy, whom he had never seen, much less evaluated as a medical patient.

News of his failure to examine that patient -- or even to take a medical history -- got back to Washington authorities and resulted in another license suspension for "unprofessional conduct" in 2000.

By then, however, the doctor was sitting in a federal prison, convicted of extortion and wire fraud for telephoning the corporate headquarters of Jack in the Box fast food restaurants, complaining that he had been served spoiled chicken at a Seattle store and demanding cash in exchange for his silence.

"Write me a check for \$500,000 and I will swear to you I will destroy any lab reports, any pieces of chicken that may be in my freezer and you will never hear from me again," he told a Jack in the Box executive in San Diego, according to federal agents who taped the phone call.

Later, after Levine had been arrested on extortion charges, he admitted that he'd never sent the meat to a lab and considered his tactics "a somewhat unusual and unique business proposition."

Reached recently at his California office, [Randy Jones](#), the assistant U.S. attorney who prosecuted Levine, instantly recalled the case.

"It was so weird," he said. "The guy was a practicing physician, extorting money from a Jack in the Box. I just couldn't figure him out."

Within months after his release from federal supervision, Levine, apparently unbowed by Washington state's latest admonition -- this time that he no longer sell medication over the Internet -- opened a new venture, Northwest Lifestyle Medicine, on Capitol Hill.

There, prosecutors allege, he began illegally selling anabolic steroids to an undercover agent and an informer for the federal [Drug Enforcement Administration](#), using the online handle AgeIsOnlyaNumber.com. The men testified that over nearly two years, they bought several thousand dollars worth of nandrolone decanoate, stanozolol and other anabolic steroids from Levine.

But on June 17, his business came to an abrupt halt when someone called 911, reporting that the doctor appeared to be suicidal. Two Seattle police officers soon arrived at his home and there, according to prosecutor [Mark Parrent](#), they found Levine, a small amount of methamphetamine and a smorgasbord of anabolic steroids.

Yet even as he sits in a federal detention center awaiting trial, Levine's license to practice medicine in Washington still has not been officially revoked.

Only a formal hearing process can do that, said Maresh, from the quality assurance commission, and, he added, "Theoretically, one of the options available to that panel would be not to take any action."