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Women's Accusations Land Small-Town Indiana Doctor in Big Trouble

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FRANKTON, Ind. — It sounds like the plot of a steamy novel: dashing doctor finds success and riches in small-town America, leads charmed life until sex scandal erupts--and he is in the middle of it.

But it is fact, not fiction.

The protagonist, Dr. Pravin Thakkar, has been accused of gross negligence, lewd conduct, rape and other offenses against more than a dozen women. Many of the alleged victims were patients; others were women he dated who say he impregnated them and then performed abortions without their consent.

"We've had lewd and immoral allegations before . . . but never in this volume against one man," said Dan Foley, assistant to state Atty. Gen. Linley Pearson, whose office filed a complaint against Thakkar.

Thakkar, whose license is temporarily suspended, denies the charges and says he will be vindicated.

Accusers Called Liars

"You are giving a forum to people who are lying . . . (and trying) to cash in," he said. "These are not the facts."

Jeffrey Lockwood, his attorney, added: "Many of the allegations, if not all of them, are not worthy of belief."

William Lawler, the Madison County prosecutor, says charges involving five women and a sixth, unrelated offense will likely be presented to a grand jury within several weeks.

A 23-count state complaint pending before the Indiana Medical Licensing Board accuses Thakkar of a litany of misconduct, including: prescribing an addictive drug for a patient as long as she would have pelvic exams; fondling patients in the examining room; forcing a woman to have sex with him in her home; impregnating women, then performing abortions without their consent.

Separate suits and malpractice claims also are pending against Thakkar.

Cash Transfer Charges

He also will face trial in October on charges that he withdrew more than \$132,000 from his own bank accounts in a way that allegedly skirted federal rules on the reporting of withdrawals.

Many of Thakkar's accusers came forward in February at the state board hearing that resulted in the suspension of his license. A hearing on whether to revoke the license has not yet been scheduled.

One panel member called it "probably the worst abuse of physician-patient trust" he had seen. The board called Thakkar "a clear and immediate danger to the public health and safety."

"The commonality of all of their stories was pretty convincing," Foley said of the witnesses who appeared at the hearing.

Since then, the Indianapolis Star has reported that Thakkar left an Ohio medical training program in 1980 amid charges he had a sexual encounter with a patient and that he mishandled a case in which a woman suffered a hemorrhage and bled to death after giving birth.

Court records show that Thakkar left a medical residency program in Texas in 1981, after a patient complained that he made sexual remarks to women and was known as a doctor who "would conduct a pelvic exam for a head cold."

Carmen Brutchten Hertzinger, a divorced teacher's aide, contends that Thakkar got her pregnant in 1983, then pressured her to have an abortion.

"I said: 'No way. I want this baby. I love you,'" she recalled.

When she refused, she said, he drugged her, induced labor without her consent and delivered the baby a month before it was due. She says she heard a cry but never saw the child, and Thakkar told her it was stillborn. She said he also threatened that he had "six bullets" and would kill her, others and himself if she revealed what had happened.

Lured by Personal Ad

Hertzinger has sued Thakkar and he has countersued her, accusing her of slander. His suit claims she was still pregnant more than a month after the alleged abortion.

"I think he specifically sought out women who were emotionally vulnerable," said Bonnie Coffey-Myers, who answered a personal ad Thakkar placed in Indianapolis Monthly magazine.

"I was overweight, divorced, raising two kids on my own. . . . Attracting the attention of a healthy, intelligent, wealthy, powerful physician," she said. "It's every woman's dream."

Coffey-Myers said that after she became pregnant, Thakkar told her he would perform an abortion but would have to falsify records because the procedure wasn't allowed at the hospital.

Thakkar has supporters.

He's "one of the finest doctors I've ever had," Joyce Thompson wrote in a letter to a local newspaper. "He's always been there when needed--taken great care and showed genuine concern for me."

Thakkar's lawyer said that such support may have little impact. "He's already been tried and convicted in the press," Lockwood said, noting some of his client's accusers have appeared on the Oprah Winfrey-Geraldo Rivera TV talk show circuit.

"A small group of people are getting an awful lot of media attention and . . . feel they're going to get an awful lot of money from the doctor."

Pravin Thakkar, 38, came to this central Indiana town of 2,000 in 1981 to replace the only doctor, who had died.

"He was a congenial sort of person," said Gerald Harper, a member of the Lions Club, which organized the committee that recruited the new physician. "He seemed very . . . settled in his ways." Thakkar was married at the time, and he has a child.

"He seemed like he cared about whether you were ill and he would be available whenever possible," said Betty Janney, clerk-treasurer in nearby Gaston, where he had a part-time practice.

The man who had known poverty in India built a prosperous practice and reported gross annual income of \$500,000.

Some women met him as patients, but Thakkar also placed blind ads in newspapers and magazines. He met his current fiancée through an ad in which he described himself as filled with "dreams, love & sensitivity."

For some, the 5-foot-6, graying doctor lived up to the image. He wooed women with soft music, sweet words and a soothing manner.

"It's almost like having a spell put over you," Hertzinger recalled.

"He was like no other man I'd ever met," said Kathy Collins, who was the first to sue Thakkar. "He was very soft. He was very caring."

Collins said she met Thakkar as a patient and, after dating him on and off for years, became pregnant. When she told him, she said, he performed an abortion on her without her consent.

"I hurt so bad inside, I knew I had to do something," she explained. "I just knew that I couldn't go on knowing what he did and letting him get away with it."

Her suit opened the floodgates. Many of the allegations are several years old, raising questions as to why some women waited so long and continued to consult him as their doctor.

"If they thought he was a heel . . . why did they go back to him?" asked Harper of the Lions Club. "It just don't make sense."

Some of the women cited financial reasons. Coffey-Myers said Thakkar agreed to do her tubal ligation for whatever part of the fee her insurance would cover.

Some said they feared that they wouldn't be believed if they challenged a doctor. "Once they saw others coming forward, (they thought) if they banded together with other folks, maybe something would be done," said Foley, the attorney general's aide.

Today, they have mixed feelings about Thakkar.

"My attitude ranges from pity to hatred," said Coffey-Myers. "Perhaps some of us were naive and gave him the benefit of the doubt too many times. That doesn't mean any of us deserved what we got. I feel much the same way a rape victim does."