

Further revelations about sterilizations and medical malpractice at ICE detention facility in Georgia

By Meenakshi Jagadeesan
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There have been multiple new reports of the sterilizations and surgical procedures performed without consent on women held in the Irwin County Detention Center in rural Georgia. The Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention center run by the private firm, LaSalle Correction, has been in the news most recently because of a whistleblower complaint filed last week on behalf of nurse Dawn Wooten, who had worked in a medical capacity at the center until July. Wooten alleged wide-spread, horrifying medical malpractice including mass hysterectomies that targeted the vulnerable immigrant women held in the center.

Much of the mainstream media attention, as well as the indignation of the Democratic Party has been focused on the question of whether or not there were in fact “mass” hysterectomies. The point, however, is not the number of surgeries, but rather the fact that such a situation even exists.

It is a well-established matter of public record that the plight of detainees in the vast network of camps run by private contractors, and overseen by ICE, is nothing short of inhumane. The already ugly situation has been exacerbated by the on-going COVID-19 pandemic, the effects of which in the network of detention camps are still to be fully exposed. Tales of detainees being packed into small spaces, being denied basic hygiene products, and handed a single mask to protect them from the highly contagious coronavirus are by now widespread. In this context, Wooten’s complaint serves as yet another glimpse of horrors that the Trump administration’s relentless war on immigrants has visited upon the most vulnerable sections of the working class.

Wooten highlighted the role of an unnamed physician that she had named “the uterus collector” because of the sheer number of surgeries he had performed on female detainees. An Associated Press (AP) review of the medical records of four women, and interviews with their lawyers, revealed even more evidence of medical malpractice by the physician, who had apparently performed numerous surgeries without the knowledge or express consent of the patients.

Mileidy Cardente Fernandez, a 39-year-old immigrant from Cuba, was informed that she was getting medical help to treat her ovarian cysts. A month after the surgery, Fernandez, who showed a reporter the scars on her abdomen, still does not know what surgery was performed on her. Cardente told the AP: “The only thing they told me was: ‘You’re going to go to sleep and when you wake up, we will have finished.’” Irwin County Detention Center, when asked to explain the surgery, handed over 100 pages of Cardente’s medical records, none of which mentioned the surgery.

Pauline Biman, who had been held in detention for nearly two years, asked to see a doctor because of abnormalities with her period. She was told she had an ovarian cyst and agreed to undergo a dilation and curettage (D&C) procedure to remove the cyst. When she woke up after the surgery, she was told one of her fallopian tubes had been removed. The procedure, which Biman did not consent to, made it impossible for her to be able to conceive naturally. At the time of the surgery, Biman was 29 years old.

As immigration attorney Elizabeth Mahern, who has many clients at the Irwin Detention Center told the *Guardian*, she was “not at all surprised” by the revelations and had been told by “multiple people

[who] went to that doctor only to be told they needed to have an ovary removed.” As she pointed out: “That is a piece by piece sterilization, but it’s a sterilization...We think we’re going to find even more women who have had basically their fertility limited or taken away altogether because of the actions of this doctor and the facility to continue to take immigration detainees to him and for Ice to continue to foot the bill and approve their requests.”

This past week, the *Intercept* revealed that the physician in question was obstetrics and gynecology (OB-GYN) specialist, Dr. Mahendra Amin, based in Douglas, Georgia. Amin, who seems to have at least one other practice, works with Irwin County Hospital, where detainees have been taken for medical treatment.

When contacted by the *Intercept*, Amin acknowledged that he has performed medical procedures on immigrant women brought in from the detention center, but claimed that he had only carried out “one or two hysterectomies in the past two or three years.” In a statement to the media, Amin’s lawyer, Scott Grubman insisted that his client was innocent of all the charges, and that he was a “highly respected physician who has dedicated his adult life to treating a high-risk, underserved population in rural Georgia.”

Following the exposure of Amin’s name, Bryan Cox, a spokesman for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement announced Tuesday that he would no longer be used to treat patients from Irwin.

The former Irwin employee, who along with a detainee and several detainee advocates, had exposed the physician’s name had a somewhat different perspective: “All I know is, if you go in for anything, the majority of the time, he’s going to suggest surgery...I don’t know why. I just — I don’t know why. He does a lot of surgeries.”

Amin, who is the only OB-GYN serving the detainee population at Irwin, was previously taken to court for filing false Medicaid claims. In the case against Amin, other doctors and Irwin County Hospital filed in the US District Court for the Middle District in Georgia, the government alleged that Medicaid was being billed for obstetric ultrasounds even when it was not necessary. The case was settled out of court with the hospital paying the government over half a million dollars without admitting liability.

Detainees who spoke to the *Intercept* pointed out that

they had no choice but to see Dr. Amin for any gynecological problems despite his reputation for “rough treatment” and performing a large number of surgical procedures. One detainee, in fact, requested deportation after repeated medical visits, because she feared she was going to “lose her reproductive system” if she saw the doctor again. Another stated that “the doctor got mad when I didn’t want to have the surgery.” All of them stated that there were no interpreters present, and they were “unclear about the necessity or purpose of the proposed treatment.”

The testimony of the detainees makes obvious the very real fear and confusion that prevails among the immigrant women forced to seek medical help while in federal custody. The detention network built up by the Obama administration and developed by the Trump administration has frequently drawn comparison with Nazi concentration camps. This latest round of revelations, with its harrowing tales of forced sterilization, only strengthens the chilling parallel.

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