How One Man Stole $8.2M Worth of HIV Meds in Two Years

In his guilty plea, the New Jersey man detailed how he conspired with others to steal HIV meds from a Veterans Affairs pharmacy and resell them.

August 17, 2021 By Trent Straube

A New Jersey man admitted last week in federal court that he played a role in stealing more than $8.5 million worth of HIV medications from the Department of Veterans Affairs. He then resold the meds for a profit, according to his statement.

Wagner Checonolasco, aka "Wanny," of Lyndhurst, pleaded guilty to his role in a scheme to steal medications for HIV, which lasted from August 2017 through November 20, 2019, according to an August 10 press release from the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of New Jersey. The specific charge is conspiring to steal government property.

In his guilty plea, Checonolasco admitted to conspiring with Lisa Hoffman of Orange, New Jersey, who worked as a pharmacy procurement technician at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC) in East Orange, New Jersey. She is accused of ordering extra HIV meds, stealing them from the VA and selling them for cash to Checonolasco, who then resold them.

Hoffman has been indicted on three counts: conspiracy, theft of government property and theft of medical products. The Justice Department points out that she is presumed innocent until proven guilty.

According to a separate press release from the U.S. Attorney's Office, Hoffman has been indicted for stealing more than $10 million worth of HIV meds from October 2015 to November 2019.

That press release, dated July 6, lays out the case against her based on documents and statements made in court:

> From October 2015 through November 2019, Hoffman was a procurement officer at the VAMC who used her authority to order large quantities of HIV prescription medications so that she could steal the excess. After the medications arrived, Hoffman waited until coworkers were out of sight and then removed them from the VAMC.
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> Once Hoffman stole the medications, she met her associate, Wagner Checonolasco, aka

> “Wanny,” generally at Hoffman’s residence, so that Hoffman could provide the stolen HIV medications to Checonolasco in exchange for cash. Hoffman and Checonolasco used an encrypted messaging application to plan and execute their thefts and sales of the stolen HIV medications, including arranging for the medications-for-cash exchanges. After obtaining the stolen HIV medications from Hoffman, Checonolasco sold them. Hoffman and Checonolasco stole approximately $10 million worth of HIV medications belonging to the VAMC during the conspiracy.

Checonolasco’s sentencing is scheduled for December 15. “The conspiracy charge, according to the Department of Justice, “is punishable by a maximum penalty of five years in prison and a fine of $250,000, or twice the gross gain or loss from the offense, whichever is greatest.”

The press releases did not state which HIV medications were stolen or where they were resold.

Did you know that the Veterans Health Administration is the nation’s largest single provider of medical care to people with HIV? To learn more, read “Veterans Affairs Leaders Want to Improve Linkage to HIV Care” and click the hashtag #Veterans Affairs for a collection of POZ articles on the VA.

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