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X-rays, surgery fail to find 'bug' in man

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The first CIA operation in Jackson Memorial Hospital history ended in disappointment Friday for James Pettit.

It was just after 10 a.m. when Pettit — 39, convicted drug pilot, accused arsonist and firm believer that the Central Intelligence Agency has planted electronic thought control devices in his skull — rolled into Ward D at Jackson in a wheelchair and leg irons. He was clutching a court order for the surgery that would prove his claim, ease his mind and, maybe, cut his prison time.

"I'm not going to let them put me to sleep," he said warily. "Jackson's a damn government hospital."

He needn't have worried. After reviewing new X-rays taken Friday, the Jackson physician scheduled to do exploratory surgery and find out just what was in Pettit's head, refused to operate above the neck.

"I'm not touching that head," said Jackson professor of surgery Gerado Gomez.

He did take a lump of scar tissue out of Pettit's back, though, while two lawyers, three nurses, another doctor, two policemen, one newsman and sundry security guards watched. Pettit said the lump hurt him when he was in "the company of a certain person."

As the herd of spectators watched, Gomez dissected the blob of tissue, the color and texture of a tiny brain. It contained scar tissue.

Pettit demanded Gomez remove lumps from his scarred arms. Gomez refused. He said it could be dangerous and was uncalled for since there was nothing indicated on the X-rays.

"It's getting a little unreasonable. Cut here, cut there. Just exploring for what he says. I don't think any [doctor] would go for that," Gomez said.

"I want those things that look like bottles taken out of my head. Any refusal by Jackson Memorial Hospital to follow this court order constitutes, in my opinion, collusion with the CIA," said Pettit, holding the folded order from Circuit Judge Howard Gross, as senior surgical resident Michael Kotler sewed up his back. "Tell me, doctor, do you work for the CIA?"

"What are you talking about?" Gomez said, laughing uneasily, looking confused. "I don't work for the government."

"I don't think any surgeon in their right mind is going to do surgery based on X-rays that show nothing," Gomez said.

Gomez asked someone to call Judge Gross, whose order required the surgery. Gross, however, had gone for the weekend and couldn't resolve the issue until Monday, assistant state attorney Philip Maniatty said.

Friday's medical first evolved through Pettit's steadfast assertion about CIA involvement, tests which proved him sane and competent to stand trial, and the ambiguous results of previous X-rays.

The story began in 1982 when Pettit crashed an airplane loaded with Quaaludes. He was horribly burned and underwent surgery at Brooke Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas. There, he contends, a government doctor working for the CIA implanted electronic mind control devices in his head.

Pettit, already convicted and sentenced to 15 years on a federal drug charge, is on trial again for an arson charge which alleges he tried to burn down his girl friend's Dade house in 1983 while resisting federal arrest.

During the trial, Pettit said he agreed to plead no contest to the arson charge and accept a 30-year sentence if the judge would order new X-rays. Gross agreed, Pettit said, with the understanding that if the X-rays showed something surgery would follow.

To everyone's astonishment — except, perhaps, Pettit's — the new X-rays showed something in Pettit's neck. Judge Gross ordered exploratory surgery.

"I don't know what's in there," said Maniatty, chief of the arson division said before Pettit arrived Friday. "But whatever it is, it isn't a defense for arson."

"I thought he was off the wall until the X-rays actually showed there was something in there," Pettit's attorney Roy Gelber said as he stood at the Ward D admitting desk.

What showed up on Friday's X-rays, Pettit said, were fragments of shotgun pellets in the back of his neck from a youthful encounter. Also showing up were "little bottle-shaped things" that appeared in the upper jaw.

Sitting in a white surgical gown with blue designs in the crowded viewing room, Pettit drew a circle around a shadowy shape on the jaw of the X-ray with a grease pencil.

"There. See that!" he said. "Air surrounded by bone," said Jackson radiologist Dr. Edward Russell.

"I want it known that the doctors at Jackson Memorial Hospital refused to operate on the suspicious area," Pettit said.

"Mr. Pettit wants the court order enforced," Gelber said. He said they would try again in court.

"Since I took this case, I've had seven people come to the office asking if I can help them with similar problems," Gelber said. "One said she was John Kennedy's girl friend and the FBI had put transmitters in her head so she wouldn't get JFK in trouble. Everybody wants to know what those things are in his [Pettit's] head."