

Utah doctor indicted in therapy camp death

Prosecutors say SLC boy died in Colorado after his illness was ignored

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A prominent Utah County physician stands accused of negligent homicide in connection with the death of a Salt Lake City teen in a southwest Colorado wilderness therapy program.

But Keith R. Hooker, who has worked in the emergency department at Utah Valley Regional Medical Center since 1970, says he is innocent. And the indictment, which also accuses him of child abuse, contains no allegations about what he is alleged to have done or failed to do.

Caleb Jensen, 15, died May 2, 2007, from a staphylococcus infection, which Colorado prosecutors contend went untreated despite glaring symptoms. The boy spent the last week of his life lying in his own urine and feces, in a remote field camp operated by Alternative Youth Adventures in Montrose County, Colo., court documents allege.

Jensen had been sent to the camp by Utah juvenile justice officials. Colorado authorities shut AYA down two months after Jensen's death.

Hooker, who served as the program's medical adviser, was indicted in July and related documents were unsealed Aug. 25. He was arraigned in a Montrose, Colo., court last week and pleaded not guilty. His next hearing is scheduled for Oct. 6.

Reached at his Mapleton residence Friday, Hooker declined comment. His Provo lawyer, Mike Esplin, said he has not seen testimony given before the grand jury, but he believes there is insufficient evidence to support the charges.

"Doctor Hooker never examined Caleb. His role is an adviser to the program. We think it's an overshot," Esplin said. "He didn't give [AYA] any advice concerning this incident. We are in the dark. [Investigators] never talked to him."

Montrose County District Attorney Myrl Serra did not return phone calls.

Also charged are camp emergency medical technician Ben Askins, who faces a more serious charge of manslaughter; program director Jim Omer and the businesses, Alternative Youth Adventures of Colorado and its corporate parent, Community Education Centers Inc.

The New Jersey-based company provides treatment to 6,000 juvenile and adult offenders a year, in seven states. A corporate spokesman said the company was in the process of closing AYA at the time of Jensen's death, but declined to comment further.

No charges were filed against field counselors who tended to Jensen and later spoke to investigators.

Jensen was admitted to AYA's 60-day program on March 28, 2007. He had undergone an initial medical exam in Utah, but the exam did not reveal any illness, court documents said. His symptoms began April 23 when "it was noted that Caleb had a small blister located on his right ankle," the indictment said.

The teen wrote in his journal the next day that he was "burning up, vomiting and having trouble hiking."

Suspecting Jensen of "faking" his illness, camp staff separated him from the group until he died eight days later, the charges allege. Staff ordered him to wear diapers and put him on suicide watch, but allegedly did nothing to treat the fatal infection.

Askins checked the boy on April 26 after he complained of hip and knee pain. Jensen was given ibuprofen but

none of his vital signs were recorded. Jensen was soon urinating and defecating on himself and fellow students expressed concern about his health, documents said.

For the last three days of his life, Jensen was not eating and he rarely stirred from his filthy sleeping area. Counselor Tracy Hale noted that he would lie in the sun most of the day without attempting to move into shade, the charges said.

Field staff repeatedly called Askins and Omer at the AYA base camp, but no staff responded and no additional medical attention was ordered, documents said. After Jensen died on the afternoon of May 2, a helicopter ambulance crew responded to Hale's call for help and pronounced the teen dead at the scene.

Omer and Askins could not be reached. Jensen's mother, Dawn Woodson, declined to comment, citing the advice of her Salt Lake City attorney, Tom Boyle. "We are investigating the facts and circumstances," Boyle said.

Hooker, who also advises Utah County search and rescue, remains on UVRMC's medical staff. "If in the course of the proceedings something comes up, then we would re-examine that," hospital spokeswoman Janet Frank said.

Hooker's indictment is a shock to many who have worked with him in Utah's wilderness-therapy industry. He helped found Loa's Aspen Achievement Academy and serves as medical director for Wilderness Quest in Monticello.

He was inducted in 2005 into the Clan of the Hand, an industry hall of fame.

"In my dealings with him, he has been very professional. . . . [He] has a great knowledge of young people in a wilderness setting and the types of protocols that need to be in place to make sure they are safe," said Mike Merchant, who runs an Arizona program and presides over the Wilderness Quest board.

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