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Kidney Broker Pleads Guilty in First U.S. Organ-Traffic Case

By David Glovin, Michael Smith and David Voreacos - Oct 27, 2011

A New York man admitted to brokering black-market sales of human kidneys to three Americans, becoming the first person convicted in the U.S. of organ trafficking.

Levy Izhak Rosenbaum, 60, pleaded guilty today to three counts of organ trafficking and one count of conspiracy in federal court in Trenton, [New Jersey](#). He said three ailing people in New Jersey paid him a total \$410,000 to arrange the sale of kidneys from healthy donors and an undercover FBI agent paid him \$10,000. A 1984 U.S. law bans the sale of human organs.

At today's plea hearing, Rosenbaum, an Israeli citizen who lives in the Borough Park neighborhood of [Brooklyn](#), briefly described one of the three transactions to U.S. District Judge Anne Thompson.

"The son told me the father has [kidney failure](#)," Rosenbaum said. "I helped him."

Rosenbaum faces as many as five years in prison on each of the four counts. He also agreed to forfeit \$420,000 and may be deported to [Israel](#). The judge set sentencing for Feb. 2. Richard Finkel, an attorney for Rosenbaum, said his client will ask the judge to spare him prison.

Rosenbaum was arrested in July 2009 in a [Federal Bureau of Investigation](#) crackdown on [money laundering](#) and political corruption in New Jersey. Among the 44 people charged were rabbis and several mayors. The same cooperating witness, Solomon Dwek, who helped the government gather evidence in the corruption and laundering probes brought authorities to Rosenbaum.

Patients Not Charged

The U.S. didn't charge or identify any people who bought kidneys through Rosenbaum.

Rosenbaum admitted details of a scheme that federal prosecutors outlined in a criminal complaint with his arrest. According to Rosenbaum's statements to investigators, he began brokering kidney sales around 1999, recruited Israelis to sell their organs and charged Americans as much as \$160,000 a kidney.

In court today, Rosenbaum admitted that from 2006 to 2009 he recruited Israeli donors, arranged for their travel to the U.S. and their lodging, and set up blood tests to match them with recipients.

He told an undercover FBI agent that he had arranged "quite a lot" of transplants, according to the

complaint.

"I've never had a failure," he told the agent in a 2008 conversation quoted in the complaint.

Court papers don't identify hospitals where Rosenbaum's clients underwent transplants. Prosecutors haven't accused hospitals or doctors of wrongdoing.

'Expert' Surgeons

"The transplant surgeries occurred in prestigious American hospitals, and were performed by experienced and expert kidney transplant surgeons," Finkel and Ronald Kleinberg, another attorney for Rosenbaum, said in a statement after the hearing.

Rosenbaum admitted in court papers that he "would assist the donor and the recipient to coordinate a cover story to mislead hospital personnel into believing that the donation of the kidney was a purely voluntary act and not a commercial transaction."

One Rosenbaum client used the [Johns Hopkins](#) Hospital in Baltimore, according to five people familiar with the case. Rosenbaum sold a kidney to a New Jersey man who got a transplant there around three years ago, according to the people, who couldn't be identified because the hospital hasn't been publicly identified.

Gary Stephenson, director of media relations at Johns Hopkins, declined to comment on the case, citing privacy laws. A team of doctors and social workers subjects every donor and recipient to scrutiny, he said.

Transplant Evaluation

"All potential donors and recipients are interviewed multiple times by a team of providers during a rigorous screening process," he said in a statement. "However, no matter how thorough our policies and procedures are, the pre-transplant evaluation may not detect premeditated and skillful attempts to undermine and deceive the evaluation process."

Rosenbaum's defense attorneys said in a statement after the hearing that the transplants "were successful and the donors and recipients are now leading full and healthy lives." They said that "each of the recipients had been on an official organ donor network waiting list for receipt of a kidney, but was unable to obtain a kidney and had little or no hope in obtaining a kidney through the waiting list system."

U.S. Attorney Paul Fishman said Rosenbaum admitted he "was not new to the human kidney business when he was caught brokering what he thought was a black market deal."

'Grave Threat'

"A black market in human organs is not only a grave threat to public health, it reserves lifesaving

treatment for those who can best afford it at the expense of those who cannot," Fishman said in a statement.

Rosenbaum arrived in the U.S. from Israel after living in [Australia](#), according to an acquaintance, Isaac Lichtenstein. In Brooklyn, he launched a company called Medicalink USA Inc. in 2000 and took control of a charity set up by a nephew.

The company and charity, called Kav Lachayim United Lifeline Inc., aimed to "help needy, sick and disabled people," mostly Orthodox Jews, according to corporate filings and other records.

Court papers don't say how much Rosenbaum made from his 10- year scheme. Beginning in 2003, Rosenbaum, his wife or a company he controlled bought four New York properties for a total \$5.1 million and built the 6,745 square-foot brick house where he now lives, according to real estate records.

He previously rented a three-bedroom, two-bath apartment for about \$1,500 a month, according to Yitzchok Krasne, who lives there now. In court, Rosenbaum said he worked in the real estate business.

In an interview, Rosenbaum's sister-in-law, Rachel Rosenbaum, recalled an elderly man close to death telling Levy Rosenbaum that he was desperate for a kidney.

"So he helped him," she said.

The case is U.S. v. Rosenbaum, 09-mag-3620, U.S. District Court, District of New Jersey (Trenton).

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