State Ordered to Treat Former Black Panther Mumia Abu-Jamal for Hep C

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A federal judge has ruled that Pennsylvania inmate Mumia Abu-Jamal should be provided new treatments by the state for his hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection. In time, the decision could help open the doors to HCV treatment for nearly 7,000 prisoners in Pennsylvania with the virus, Philly.com reports.

U.S. District Judge Robert D. Mariani ordered that Abu-Jamal, a well-known African-American print and radio journalist serving life in prison, must be seen by a doctor within 14 days to determine whether he is medically eligible for treatment. Abu-Jamal has been incarcerated since 1982, when he was convicted for the death of a Philadelphia police officer—a crime the former Black Panther maintains he never committed.

In 2015, Abu-Jamal, who spent 29 years on death row, was hospitalized after he fell into diabetic shock and kidney failure under prison care. In his lawsuit, the activist claimed he was diagnosed with hep C in 2012 but was offered no treatment for or information about the virus since learning his status. The lawsuit also alleged that in 2014 the state correctional facility where he is jailed neglected to treat conspicuous rashes and sores that appeared on his body, which are known signs of liver failure commonly associated with hepatitis C.

Legal advocates working with Abu-Jamal said the ruling was the first time a federal court had directly ordered prison officials to provide an inmate with the latest hepatitis C medications, which came to market in 2013. However, attorneys representing Abu-Jamal said they fully expect the state's Department of Corrections to appeal the decision.

If ultimately successful, the ruling in favor of Abu-Jamal's treatment could pave the way for Pennsylvania's nearly 7,000 HCV-positive inmates to also receive next-generation HCV cures. However, Pennsylvania health officials say doing so would cost the state an estimated $600 million—a cost they are likely to fight against paying.

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