



UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL

[News](#) [Photos](#) [About Us](#) [Contact](#)

Search the UPI wire:

Go

[Advanced Search](#)

View the UPI wire by desk:

Washington Politics & Policy Go

[Terms of Service](#)

Anti-malaria drug cited in Illinois murder

By Mark Benjamin and Dan Olmsted

From the [Washington Politics & Policy Desk](#)

Published 2/21/2003 3:33 PM

[View printer-friendly version](#)

CHARLESTON, Ill., Feb. 21 (UPI) -- The lawyer for a former Marine convicted of murder will tell an Illinois jury next week that an anti-malaria drug associated with psychotic behavior and aggression triggered the killing, and he should be spared the death penalty.

The case marks the first time that side effects of the drug, called Lariam, have been raised in front of a U.S. jury in a criminal case. Some believe the drug could have played a role in a string of killings by Fort Bragg soldiers last summer, though the Army calls that unlikely.

Anthony Mertz, 26, was convicted Feb. 12 of killing fellow Eastern Illinois University student Shannon McNamara in her Charleston, Ill., apartment on June 12, 2001. The jury is now hearing testimony before deciding whether to sentence him to death.

"When the Marines gave Lariam to my client they set in motion a chain of events that caused the death of Shannon McNamara," defense counsel David Williams told United Press International Friday.

In an unusual twist, the defense team first began looking at the drug after an expert for the prosecution asked Mertz during a jailhouse interview about malaria drugs the Marines had given him.

The case has received national attention because if Mertz is sentenced to die, he would be the first person to face execution in Illinois since former Gov. George Ryan emptied death row in January.

Mertz was convicted of breaking into McNamara's apartment and choking her to death with a washcloth during a struggle. Her body was then slashed with a kitchen knife.

During testimony in the death penalty phase, prosecutors introduced witnesses who said Mertz had told them he had murdered another woman, Amy Warner, in June 1999 by stabbing her.

Although the defense will point out that Mertz had a troubled childhood and a drinking problem, they will also argue that Mertz's serious mental problems that made him violent started after he took Lariam as a Marine in Okinawa, Japan, in 1995 and then again in 1997.

"I don't think there was ever a time anybody told us he was violent before he took Lariam," said Michael Dennis, a member of the defense team who interviewed family, friends and fellow Marines after he learned that the prosecution had asked Mertz about malaria drugs in the military.

The prosecution says it was merely trying to anticipate arguments that might be used to keep Mertz off death row. "It comes down to figuring out what the defense is going to rely on," Coles County State's Attorney Steve Ferguson told UPI.

"The particulars of Lariam we know very little about, and it's not appropriate to comment," he said.

The prospect that the drug could trigger homicidal violence was raised last year after a string of murders at Fort Bragg, N.C. In three of the cases, soldiers who had recently returned from Afghanistan were suspected of killing their wives. Two of the soldiers had taken Lariam while deployed there, according to the Army, but it said in a report it was "unlikely" that the drug triggered the string of killings so close together. Two of those soldiers also committed suicide, police said.

Lariam's manufacturer, Swiss drug giant Hoffmann-La Roche, warned for the first time last summer that mental problems such as depression, aggression, psychotic behavior, insomnia and abnormal dreams have been reported to last "long after" a person stops taking the drug, and it also acknowledged rare reports of suicide.

Roche spokesman Terry Hurley said the company had not heard of the Mertz case, but that "there is no reliable scientific evidence that Lariam is associated with violent acts or criminal conduct."

He noted the drug has been taken by more than 25 million people worldwide over 17 years. "The safety of Lariam has extensively been studied and published in the peer-reviewed medical literature. Lariam remains one of the drugs of choice for the prevention and treatment of malaria by leading public health authorities, including the Centers for Disease Control and the World Health Organization."

According to defense attorney Williams, Mertz sought help at a Department of Veterans Affairs hospital in Danville, Ill., in March 1999, eight months after leaving the Marines. He had recently been arrested for drunk driving and had attempted suicide while in jail.

According to the VA doctor's notes, Mertz suffered from major depression, alcohol abuse and had "been thinking about hurting other people so they in return hurt him." The notes indicate Mertz reported feeling depressed for months, that his "concentration is poor" and that he felt helpless and hopeless. The notes said that "sleep remains a problem" and that Mertz also described getting "violent nightmares where he has woken up and found himself choking his girlfriend."

The June 1999 death of Amy Warner, to which witnesses also tied Mertz, was three months after that VA visit. Shannon McNamara was murdered two years after that.

Mertz's military records do not show that he took Lariam, Williams said, but the defense is convinced he did after looking at his record of deployments and talking with Marines who served with him.

Brad Adams of Mandeville, La., said he and Mertz both took Lariam during two separate deployments to Okinawa in 1995 and 1997 while the two served together for over three years in the 1st Battalion 5th Marines. Adams said that in Japan they took Lariam while serving in "expeditionary units" for six months that can be deployed anywhere in the region on short notice.

"I did take the drug in the Marine Corps with Anthony," Adams said. "We were in formation and they handed it out in formation." Adams said he does not remember Mertz exhibiting odd behavior at the time, except for his involvement in bar fights. "I did not notice any kind of change with him and the drug, but I can not really remember. It was a long time ago," said Adams.

In their effort to prevent Mertz's execution, the defense will also portray him as the victim of childhood sexual abuse and neglect when he grew up in Rossville, a small farming community in east-central Illinois, where his grandmother raised him and where he had 13 years of perfect attendance at the local Methodist church. His attorneys will also note Mertz's history of substance abuse.

The defense said Lariam is a legitimate issue to raise as "mitigation" in the death penalty phase because some acknowledged side effects of the drug match Mertz's documented symptoms, and he appears to have become violent only after he began taking the drug.

As a kid in Rossville, Mertz played high school football and baseball and his coach called him a "team player" who never displayed a temper and was not the sort of kid to look for a fight, according to a defense document.

Among Mertz's symptoms after leaving the Marines, violent nightmares in particular have been reported in other cases where some suspect that Lariam triggered violence.

During the Somalia operation in the early 1990s, a Canadian army corporal, Clayton Matchee, allegedly led a group of soldiers who tortured and killed a teenage boy who had snuck into the compound. The incident occurred on what troops called Psycho Tuesday, the day they took their weekly Lariam dose. Matchee subsequently attempted suicide by hanging and suffered permanent brain damage.

Matchee's wife, Marj, told the Ottawa Citizen at the time that when her husband was home from Somalia on leave before the incident, she woke up in the middle of the night to find his hands around her neck. Marj Matchee said her husband attributed his behavior to Lariam.

A formal inquiry into the incident concluded that no link to Lariam could be established "without extensive further investigation."

British Army Lt. Col. Ashley Croft, who advises England's military on malaria prevention, said he believes a link to Lariam is "plausible" in that 1993 incident.

"I do, because this sort of behavior they were experiencing was psychotic and out of character," he told UPI in an

interview before the Fort Bragg killings. "I remember my wife and I were in England (and we read) about this story, the Canadians going mad and torturing people. It just seemed to be bizarre and totally out of character. So yes, it seems to me to be plausible."

In addition to the string of incidents at Fort Bragg last summer, the wife of another soldier who had just returned from Afghanistan in December and had taken Lariam said he tried to strangle her. She told UPI that he had been abusive before but that his behavior had frighteningly intensified when he returned.

The U.S. military has consistently said it sees no evidence that the drug has caused serious problems. "While adverse events have been reported among deployed personnel prescribed the drug, they have been few in number and generally of low severity," Assistant Secretary of Defense William Winkenwerder Jr. wrote Rep. John McHugh, R-N.Y., in September in response to concerns he raised about the drug.

"In the cases where adverse events have been reported," he continued, "symptoms normally resolved when the drug was discontinued and the member switched to an alternative product." Two other drugs are also recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to ward off malaria.

UPI has interviewed a number of soldiers who were stationed in Afghanistan, Africa, Southeast Asia and elsewhere who say Lariam has triggered suicide attempts, depression, aggression and homicidal urges in them but that the military has discounted their concerns and sometimes told them to keep taking it. In some cases, they say, the military has moved to discharge them for being mentally ill.

Copyright © 2001-2003 United Press International

[View printer-friendly version](#)

Copyright © 2001-2003 United Press International. All rights reserved.