

Big pharma's crusade to end the death penalty

The US state of Arkansas has just fast-tracked three executions to beat the expiry date on their lethal drugs: the makers are refusing to sell them any more. Moral? Or self-serving?



Chilling: Each of the 1,951 executions in the USA since 1976 has been by lethal injection.

No-one had been executed in the southern state of Arkansas since 2005. But late on Thursday night Ledell Lee, who had been on death row for more than 20 years, was killed by lethal injection at the state's death chamber.

Lee was convicted of beating Debra Reese to death with a tyre thumper in 1993. He was arrested less than an hour after the killing when he had spent some of the money he had stolen from his victim. Lee and his family protested his innocence until his death.

It came after the state's controversial decision to execute eight people in 11 days; officials had found out its supply of one of the three drugs used in lethal injections expires in late April. On Monday **Jack Jones and Marcel Williams** were put to death in the first double execution on the same day in the USA for 17 years.

The decision was met with fury by human rights groups and lawyers. But another group has also weighed in to

condemn the state's actions: the drug companies themselves.

Before Ledell Lee's execution, two drug companies asked a federal court to stop the state using their drugs. They have criticised how Arkansas obtained the drugs, and the secrecy laws that surround lethal injections.

The procedure followed by Arkansas in the last week uses **midazolam**, a controversial sedative employed in bungled or unnecessarily long executions in **four other states**. One infamous case in Oklahoma from 2014 involved the failed execution of Clayton Lockett, who died of a heart attack 43 minutes after a cocktail of lethal drugs had failed to kill him. According to eyewitnesses, he shook uncontrollably and appeared to be in acute pain.

The companies state they were unaware that their drugs would be used to kill people, as midazolam has a variety of **other uses**: "When the medicines could be used to protect life, they are instead being used to end it." Using their medicines in executions,

they say, "runs counter to the manufacturers' mission to save people's lives".

Is it right for drug companies to campaign against the death penalty?

Life or death

Absolutely, say some. These companies have immense power, and they are well within their rights to use that power to stand up to states which are content to make people suffer when they die. It would be a great thing if pressure from hard-nosed businesses were the catalyst to a widespread abolition of the death penalty.

Hang on, reply others. The **majority of Americans** still support the death penalty as a just way of punishing the worst crimes. By attempting to withhold the drugs, the companies are subverting the law of the land and the will of the people. If you want to abolish the death penalty, you should do it by winning the argument.

YOU DECIDE

1. Do you support the death penalty?
2. Are drug companies right to withhold drugs that are used in lethal injections?

ACTIVITIES

1. In groups, devise two campaign slogans: one for the supporters of the death penalty, and one for its opponents.
2. Choose one of the countries which still practise the death penalty, and research their record of sentencing. In what way does this differ from America?

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

"There is no humane way to kill another person."

What do you think?

Q & A

Q: What do we know?

A: That the supply of drugs for lethal injections in a number of US states is running low, and that two drug companies have refused to sell their products if they know they are going to be used to kill people. We know that the USA is gradually moving away from capital punishment: it is now illegal in 18 states.

Q: What do we not know?

A: Whether states will find ways around the shortage of drugs. Some politicians have proposed other methods of execution to replace injections, such as hanging. They may also find cheaper, more efficient drugs with which to administer lethal injections.

Q: What do people believe?

A: Supporters of the death penalty see the drug companies' position as an attempt to get the death penalty abolished in America. Others believe this is a noble, moral stance.

WORD WATCH

Jack Jones and Marcel Williams – Jones was convicted in 1996 of raping and strangling Mary Phillips and attempting to murder her 11-year-old daughter. Williams was sentenced to death in 1997 for kidnapping, raping and murdering Stacy Erickson. He also abducted and raped two other women.

Midazolam – One of three drugs to be used in lethal injections. One of the others is Vecuronium Bromide, which causes paralysis. In medicine it is used in general anaesthesia to relax the skeletal muscles during surgery. The other is Potassium Chloride, which is used to stop the heart. In medicine it is used to treat low blood potassium.

Four other states – Oklahoma, Ohio, Arizona and Alabama.

Other uses – Marketed under the trade name Versed, midazolam is used for anaesthesia, and to help people with insomnia or severe agitation. It is also useful for the treatment of seizures.

Majority of Americans – According to the Death Penalty Information Centre, the figure is 62%.

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