



The Pittsburgh Press

A Scripps-Howard Newspaper

Established June 23, 1884—Published Daily and Sunday

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Give Light and the People Will Find Their Own Way

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Thursday, May 21, 1981

The Wecht Verdict

County Commissioner Cyril H. Wecht has finally had his days in court.

And after 10 hours of deliberation, a jury has acquitted him of any criminal wrongdoing while he was the county coroner.

Dr. Wecht had been charged with "theft of services," on grounds he exploited the morgue by using public employees on public time for private financial gain.

But the prosecution failed to convince the jury that that was so.

Too bad the verdict did not come months sooner. It would have saved everybody, especially Dr. Wecht, a lot of headaches. Yet Dr. Wecht himself was responsible for much of the delay due to a myriad of legal maneuvers employed at his behest.

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Actually, Dr. Wecht was charged last September by an investigative grand jury with six separate criminal offenses.

However, he did succeed in having two of the charges dismissed by a magistrate at a preliminary hearing. Two more were washed out by the trial judge. And a fifth was then dropped by the prosecution.

Thus, the jury had to decide only whether Dr. Wecht had illegally used morgue employees to perform \$115,000 worth of tissue tests for his private laboratory from 1974 through January 1979.

On this score, the verdict was: Not guilty.

Nevertheless, Dr. Wecht still faces two civil suits claiming he owes the taxpayers money for private work done at the morgue.

A \$390,000 surcharge, filed by former County Controller John P. Lynch, is on appeal before Commonwealth Court. So is a \$15,000 surcharge filed by the present controller, Frank Lucchino.

At issue in this appeal is whether a Common Pleas judge was correct in rejecting all but about \$100,000 of the Lynch surcharge, on grounds the statute of limitations had passed, and in rejecting the Lucchino surcharge altogether.

It is to be hoped these remaining questions will be resolved shortly.

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As for Dr. Wecht's continuing charges that he has been unjustly treated by his political enemies, it should be noted that a duly impaneled *grand jury* found sufficient cause to believe he *may* have violated the law.

Also, both the *committing magistrate* and the *trial judge* ruled there was enough evidence of possible wrongdoing to warrant having a jury decide the final question of guilt or innocence.

Thus, the system that was used to raise legitimate questions about Dr. Wecht's performance as coroner is part and parcel of the same system that ultimately found him innocent of any crime.